



From left to right, and down, Ambrose C. Spencer, Philip Spencer's elder brother, both sons of John C. Spencer; A United States midshipman of 1848; Illustration from The Pirate's Own Book (1837), and Slidell Mackenzie as presented in the Duyckinck's Cyclopaedia of American Literature (1854-1875.)

A Proposed Solution to the *Somers* Mutiny Tragedy

By Wm. Thomas Sherman

“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat...”
~ Luke 22:31.

“It would seem that a panic or mania prevailed on board the *Somers* -- captain, officers, and crew being afflicted with it in one way, seeing mutiny in everything -- and Midshipman Spencer afflicted with it in another shape -- concocting mutiny out of Greek letters and nothing. It is probably the greatest farce, ending in an awful tragedy, that ever was enacted since creation.”

~ *New York Herald*, Jan. 17, 1843.

Preface

There are two things likely to strike one after reflecting on the purported mutiny and subsequent hangings that occurred aboard the U.S. brig *Somers* in late 1842, and that is the event was, in retrospect, both extremely sad *and* perplexingly preposterous. With respect to its tragic aspects, a feeling person, I think, will invariably experience genuine pity for either the executed mutineers and or the correspondingly maligned captain; and, perhaps as well, pity for others who were connected with or involved in what took place. In my case, my own emotions have been at times deeply moved in these wisest, and which feelings all the more prompted me to want to get at the bottom and solve the puzzle of what transpired on that ill fated U.S. Navy training ship. Which brings us to the second point, namely, that what happened aboard the *Somers* was extraordinarily absurd. How could persons have been hanged for a mutiny that in point of fact

never really occurred; and this owing to the judgment of a naval commander; whom fellow author Edgar Allan Poe (not to mention other famous prose writers and prominent civic leaders of that day) ranked as a something of a gifted luminary, even genius?¹

Here then also was a singular opportunity to explain a seemingly bewildering mystery; where an event and all its witnesses were in an ostensibly closed off and confined space; with apparently little opportunity for outsiders to influence either their actions or subsequent testimonies. And yet despite such ideal circumstances for an investigation, attempts at something like a reasonably firm and fixed solution have ever and hitherto been thwarted.

Those who have gone to no inconsiderable trouble in researching and writing write about the case, having been so baffled, in arriving at their final conclusions could not help but, in some measure, to invoke the supernatural to aid their effort. The cover of Harrison Hayford's *The Somers Mutiny Affair* depicts an eerie looking ship beset by a haunting moon. In the same volume are quoted reminiscences of later *Somers* crew members who claimed to have seen, on the same ship, apparitions of the hanged victims.² At the end of his study, *Sea Dangers*, Philip McFarland finds himself making indirect association between the *Somers* and the Millerites, and other odd religious zealots and fanatics, of the 1840's.³ Buckner Melton, in *A Hanging Offense*, while admitting himself at a loss to account for what happened is reduced to wondering if perhaps something like current day high-schoolers shooting fellow students, combined with the (supposedly) innate cruelty of the sea (with some added lunacy thrown in) were (in the final analysis) what were at fault. In addition to these, there is a historical documentary with the unabashed title "The Curse of the Somers." It is then a bit of a marvel that no one (at least that I am aware) has yet as well tied in the *Somers* business with the mystery of the Bermuda Triangle.

It just so happens that I myself am one who has my own real life run-in with spirits and the other-worldly. Here you may (or perhaps should) understandably pause and wonder as to my sincerity or my sanity in making such a statement. Please rest assured and as far as reading what follows goes, it is not strictly necessary to question or suspect either; though whether you actually believe my personal claims is, of course, entirely up to you. In support and proof of my avowal of having personally encountered spirit people and "ghosts," I have written two works on the subject: *A New Treatise on Hell*; which is a general, howsoever and admittedly imperfect, examination on the subject of (what are termed) "ghosts" and spirit people; and, secondly, my *Narrative* which is an account of my ordeal and experiences dealing directly with the same persons.⁴ Beyond directing you to these writings of mine, there is no point to elaborate at length *just here* on and about what I myself personally know of "spirit people" (as I usually refer to them.) Suffice to say, and if you will, *at least for the sake of discussion*, grant what I assert as true, let me save us both time by saying that as I got into reading about the *Somers* case, it as a matter of course occurred to me that spirit people were very possibly involved in bringing about that tragedy. Exactly how and in what manner, I will attempt explanations as I proceed. This said, let me be emphatic in qualifying what follows by making clear that I by no means intend that what I assert cannot in any way be wrong or mistaken. All I do say is that I believe very strongly that what I propose is as good or better an explication of the mystery as any yet offered; while then simply leaving it to others (including of course you the reader) to decide for themselves whether, after hearing me, they do or do not possibly concur.

¹ See Poe's review of Slidell Mackenzie's (then Lieut. Slidell's) *The American in England*, in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, February 1836.

² See "Some Reminiscences of Philip Spencer and the Brig 'Somers,'" *The United Service: A Monthly Review of Military and Naval Affairs*, vol. IV, July 1890, pp. 35-36, by Robert C. Rogers.

³ As part of which treatment he quotes James Gordon Bennett in the *New York Herald*, Jan. 19, 1843: "'Captain Mackenzie and his officers acted at the time under a species of insanity produced by panic, a vivid imagination, and the spirit of the age all working together.' [McFarland now speaking] The mad spirit of that age of Transcendentalism, Fourierism, Millerism, Mormonism, Abolition, jingoism: 'everything is running riot -- perfectly wild.' Young Spencer longs to be a Red Rover; for his part, Mackenzie 'is fired with the idea of being a patriot of the old Roman order, and hence gives about a hundred boys, in a short cruise, two thousand colts, cats, or cowhides, and hangs up three individuals, without trial or evidence, merely to enforce order and preserve discipline. Madness all -- madness all . . .' " MSD p. 238.

⁴ You can obtain copies of these at: <http://archive.org/details/ANewTreatiseOnHell> and <http://archive.org/details/WilliamThomasShermanNarrative> or both at my Scribd page at: http://www.scribd.com/wsherman_1

Certainly it will help most measurably if you *can* find time to read also my *Treatise* and *Narrative* in accompaniment with what follows; to better and more clearly comprehend what I make reference to in this endeavor. But I will otherwise, and as best as I can under the circumstances, try to make your doing so as little necessary as possible; by furnishing you with at least *some* account and explanation in this study of the *Somers* case of what spirit people are and what they are like. First and for one, you may for practical purposes and simplicity's sake think of spirit people as ghosts acting with rational intelligence, calculation, and a forethought. They possess and are composed of a physical substance, albeit of a finer and much lighter sort than we (at least in this like) are materially composed of. Second, we need to point out that in talking about spirit people as they apply to the *Somers* case we mean *criminal* spirit people (particularly such who are seasoned, professional criminals); by which distinction we want it understood that a) there (presumably) are spirit people who are *not* criminals, and that b) if spirit people were among the fomenters of the *Somers* tragedy they were, not surprisingly, of an overtly spiteful and, on occasion, even malevolent sort. A good example of a criminal spirit person of the type I am referring to can be found in the character of Archimago in Edmund Spenser's epic lyric poem *The Fairie Queene* (found in Book I of that work, for instance.) Presented there is a kind of sorcerer ghost who seeks by means of trickery, masquerade, magic, violence, and mayhem to murder or otherwise undo his intended victims. From a more modern perspective we might further see him as a highly skilled master of mind control, crafted illusion, psychological manipulation, behavioral conditioning, and hypnotic suggestion, but who for all that is nonetheless and happens to be a ghost. Typically, he is assisted in some wise by a "regular," i.e., flesh and blood, person (or persons) who acts as his servant and intermediary or medium between other regular persons.⁵ In proposing my theory on the *Somers* affair then I will be making reference to such a one as either "Archimago" or else the "magician-ghost." Whether or not this kind of preternatural being and personage actually does or can exist one needs to go to my writings on spirit people to see there the case I make for this; as it would simply be too much to attempt the same in this survey of the *Somers* case. In addition, it can be noted, I am fully aware of the difficulty and delicacy of proving empirically the existence of spirit people; hence it would augment the complexity and labor of my task far too much to do so here. This, however, is by no means to suggest that such cannot be proved; only *here* and under the circumstances is not the place for it. In a word then and with all due respect to your intelligence as readers, I humbly entreat you to indulge my central assumption for present brevity's and convenience sake.

Some caveats. It is well to be careful and not to jump too hastily to conclusions as to a ghost's motives and specific degree of involvement, and or to assume when and what "regular" people are or are not acting knowingly in collusion with him. With regard to intent, it is to be expected that when dealing with or considering a *serious* criminal to infer their motives on a given occasion are (and taken of themselves) necessarily wicked and evil. Yet even if they are, it does not follow that *all* of their motives are so, and whether ghost or regular person it is not unknown for someone to do something very wrong, and yet persuade themselves that their reasons for acting as they do are innocent or at least justifiable ones. One might, for instance, murder out of seemingly warranted revenge. Yet another might do so not out of malice but because he is under pressure from another more criminal to commit such a crime; and variations, as you can surmise, can be quite numerous when it comes to motive and what actuates a crime or criminal activities, including, as we know from many a drama (or comedy), mistakes as to fact (*Othello*, for instance.)

Although we merely touch the surface, it can be said that a general motive of criminal spirit people on the leadership and broader level is to render and encourage regular people to be irrational, immoral, and fearful; to replace and substitute spirit people authority and magic in place of right reason and sound morals, and thereby debilitate humanity so that we will be that much more pliable and easily used and manipulated for purposes of becoming vassals, servants and slaves of such spirit people. A professional "devil" attacks good or bad people as its suits his design. One not insignificant advantage he has is that the world, generally, will not come to his victim's assistance if he patiently takes his time and applies frightening and malicious enough force and practical measures, such as trickery and bribery, enough to

⁵ Dracula's Renfield is a ready, if not so subdued and subtle, example in literature that comes to mind of such a regular person assistant to a criminal "ghost;" though such "Renfield" may also be a person of prodigious material wealth and affluence; all the better funded, supplied and armed that he might carry out his master's wishes. While a spirit person can make use of money, he himself naturally cannot hold it, make payments, or have a bank account, etc. This then and rather is one of the functions of a "Renfield."

attack them with. In the case of bad and semi-rational people, their character makes them more readily answerable and subservient to a professional ghost criminal; such that if they hesitate or refuse him their aid and assistance, he can more easily coerce or whip them like a slave to do his bidding.

One must understand also that there are limits to what a magician-ghost, traditional “devil,” or other puissant spirit person can do. Even Homer’s gods, as we are reminded in his stories, are frequently precluded from acting as they like because there are “rules” as to how things are done; and that there are usually other “gods” they must or may have to answer to for what they would do or perpetrate. Moreover, a given person has only so much physical strength, skill, social influence, points of character (such as patience), self-discipline, intelligence, or money to do or not do a given thing, and this applies to spirit just as it does to regular people. So even, for instance, if a spirit person could do something so utterly fantastic as change the weather, it doesn’t follow he (or she) could do it any old time that pleased him.

When spirit people are active and persistently involved with doings of regular people, the rules and standards regular people follow and go by will as likely as not change. This is one of the things that makes dealing with spirit people so acutely virulent and problematical. For what might be wrong or even terribly wrong to do under ordinary circumstances might, for some and as they see it, become pardonable or excusable if spirit people is involved. A good example of this is lying. If a sane and rational person knows a spirit person to have been party to a given event, it is altogether possible they will conceal or lie about what they know for the simple reason that they understandably think others will not believe them. So that per chance spirit people were actively involved in what happened on the *Somers* cruise of 1842, and this was in fact well perhaps known to and by some, including possibly authorities who later made formal inquiries into what happened. But in no wise did the latter deem it wise, feasible, or politic to openly divulge what they knew or else had good grounds to suspect. Similarly, what a regular person believes unthinkable to do under normal circumstances, they might well allow themselves if a spirit person commands or authorizes them to do it.

The ensuing examination of the *Somers* case is by no means a complete account or balanced summary narrative; and does not attempt to cover every relevant fact, event of consequence, or possible point of controversy, but only some of the more prominent ones. It does then presuppose on the part of the reader a familiarity and working knowledge of the case. For that I recommend Harrison Hayford’s *The Somers Mutiny Affair* (1959); Philip McFarland’s *Sea Dangers* (1985); Buckner Melton’s *A Hanging Offense* (2003), and original transcripts of the Court Inquiry, and Alexander Slidell Mackenzie’s Court Martial Proceedings; including James Fenimore Cooper’s brilliant review appended to the latter. There are, naturally, other pertinent and helpful works to which one could be referred, but these, as it turns out, were the ones I chiefly relied on and am much beholden to.⁶

Ghosts or no, any analysis and assessment of the *Somers* “mutiny” is an exercise in surmise and speculation, and in my case here a rather personal and idiosyncratic one. And there is no way of being certain as to what necessarily happened on board; nor can we be sure that the record we have to go upon is anything like as thorough as it should be or always trustworthy and reliable. This does not mean it is impossible for us to arrive at correct conclusions. Yet if we essay an attempt at such, we must do so with more than usual caution and circumspection; being ever ready to suspend judgment where our path is less sure and the evidence less substantial than is adequate to properly resolve and decide points and questions with due scientific confidence and precision.

⁶ For convenience, I have assigned codes to these different works in my footnotes, and which are as follows: HSM – Hayford *The Somers Mutiny Affair*; MSD -- McFarland’s *Sea Dangers*; CI – Court of Inquiry Proceedings; CM – Mackenzie Court Martial Proceedings; and CMC – Cooper’s review of the Court Martial Proceedings (and which is contained in the same volume as the latter.) While I don’t cite Melton’s *A Hanging Offense* in the footnotes, his book I sometimes found extremely helpful in bringing attention to points I may otherwise have missed or overlooked. Note, as of Sept. 2017: Further studies of the case and also extremely well done and of exceptional value are *The Cruise of the Somers: Illustrative of the Despotism of the Quarterdeck and of the Unmanly Conduct of Commander Mackenzie* (1844) by Anonymous (and drawn from by Cooper), and *The Somers Mutiny of 1842* by Angus Ephraim Goldberg, “a thesis submitted for the Degree of PhD at the University of St. Andrews,” and available in .pdf at <http://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/>

What in sum then I will endeavor to show is that both Spencer (not to mention the other accused mutineers) and Mackenzie should, as to the verdict of history, be *largely*, if not entirely, acquitted of blame; based on the defense that both were being manipulated by a presence, a *someone(s)* they either did not know of and or they could not reasonably be expected to fathom or comprehend.

~~~\*\*\*~~~

## 1. Alexander Slidell MacKenzie.

“...Had Cervantes been slain, instead of taken at Lepanto, we had never known the valiant Don Quixote, nor the facetious Sancho.”  
~ Lieut. Alexander Slidell, *The Sea-Service or, Popular Sketches of Ship-Building, Navigation, and Naval Warfare; from the earliest period to the present time* (1834).

In the course of mine own efforts to understand him, my own sentiments toward Alexander Slidell Mackenzie,<sup>7</sup> captain of the *Somers*, have oscillated between extremes of pro and con. At times I'd come to think him a hypocrite and culpable, even mad, incompetent of the *Somers* tale; only to later, quite oppositely, discover a fondness and affection for him, and, moreover, see him as someone who might, under more propitious circumstances, have proved an esteemed hero; in addition to being a laudable contributor to America's early literary heritage. And there is truth to suggest or support both interpretations. As an author, his books remain worthwhile as solid, basic histories, though perhaps overly tending to the patriotically sentimental and not without controversy, and, in the case of his travel books, highly informative and illuminating records of his era. In addition to these, I myself especially value and enjoy his volume of naval essays *The Sea Service*: a most edifying introduction to the ins and outs of vessels (in particular a naval vessel) and working a ship in the age of sail as any you are likely to lay hold of.

When in his review of James Fenimore Cooper's *History of the United States Navy*<sup>8</sup> and later, as well, in his 1840 biography of Oliver Hazard Perry,<sup>9</sup> Mackenzie took issue with Jesse Elliott's character and competence at and after the battle of Lake Erie, he, in company with associates Duer and Burgess, unwittingly stirred up a hornet's nest in the way of Cooper's response; which latter would have for him serious repercussions. Mackenzie was related to the Perrys by way of his sister Jane; who'd married Oliver Hazard Perry's younger brother Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry. Elliott was never a threat to Hazard Perry's fame to begin with; so it was fairly petty and without much purpose to target him for recrimination. Not that Mackenzie's criticisms were without foundation; they certainly weren't; nor was Cooper's scathing and last-word-on-the-subject rebuttal itself in every instance above reproach and impartial. But the occasion did provide an opportunity to verify Cooper's assessment that “he is of such a frame of mind, that when he wishes to see any particular thing, he loses sight of all others”<sup>10</sup> – an observation that proved all too true in Mackenzie's handling of matters on board the *Somers*.

That Mackenzie was a popular and well spoken of author doubtless contributed no little to Cooper's resentment and the need he felt to respond, not unlike a provoked duelist, to Mackenzie's impugning, albeit politely, his honor both as a historian and former U.S. naval officer. Washington Irving, for one, was an ardent enthusiast of Mackenzie the author, and further had the assistance of the latter's nautical acumen in composing his life of Columbus. Moreover, Mackenzie's *A Year in Spain* (1829, 1831) may have indirectly inspired Irving's other Spanish related works, such as *The Alhambra* and *The Conquest of Granada*. Often written in a prose style as colorful, sensitive and full of piquant and gentle feeling as Irving's own, *A Year in Spain* is a rich, masterful and well researched study and account of its kind, and that scarcely ceases to astonish in its rendering of meticulous detail. In addition to its relating his sights and experiences as a traveler, the work is a copious and comprehensive survey of Spain's history, geography, culture, customs, and economy; frequently interspersed with sage observations not a little impressive for a man of Mackenzie's youth. In book 1, chapter 8, he, when still Lieut. Slidell, describes seeing two robbers being hung in Madrid; whereat he concludes by pensively remarking:

---

<sup>7</sup> Slidell was his original surname, but in 1837 he added Mackenzie in memory of an uncle (his mother's brother) who'd bequeathed an inheritance to him.

<sup>8</sup> Found in *The North American Review* of October 1839, pp. 432-466.

<sup>9</sup> MacKenzie also wrote biographies of John Paul Jones (1841) and Stephen Decatur (1846).

<sup>10</sup> *The Battle of Lake Erie, or Answers to Messrs. Burges, Duer, and Mackenzie* (1843) p. 88.

"I experienced a return of the same sickly feeling of disgust with mankind and with myself, as forming part of it, with which I had once come from the reading of Rousseau's Confessions. Surely there can be nothing in such a spectacle to promote morality, nothing to make us happier or better--a spectacle which serves but to create despondency and to array man in enmity with his condition!"

How entirely different would be Slidell Mackenzie of later years who constantly reminded all who would listen that his hanging of Spencer, Cromwell, and Small served undeniably to secure discipline and boost ship's morale.

Despite the scholarly ire it later fomented with respect to the Jesse Elliott debate, Mackenzie's review of Cooper's naval history was mostly positive and complimentary. It was in this review also that he wrote at length on the subject of training new sailors and naval officers, including adding his support and ideas for the establishing of a United States naval academy. Inasmuch as these recommendations give us an insight into what he saw as his mission as later captain of the *Somers*, it is worth our reproducing them.

"...The exercises should consist in fencing, and the use of firearms; but chiefly in the manoeuvres of a small ship, of one or two hundred tons, moored near the academy. Rigging and stripping ship, exercising guns, reefing, furling, steering, and heaving the lead; every operation, in short, should be performed by the lads themselves. Each class should have its proper station; the junior class, on deck; the next would know enough to be top-men; and so on, with the stations of petty officers; the senior class would do the duty of officers, and be stationed about, to direct and aid the efforts of the crew; while in rotation one of the number would be invested with the command. One day in each week should be employed in a cruise round the harbour; while, in summer, the ordinary season of vacation might be passed in an extended cruise along the coast. Every thing done, on board of such a vessel, would be done in the best manner; the youths would have before them an epitome of their future profession, and would be constantly engaged in the actual execution of its details. If this system were introduced, it would furnish an invaluable groundwork of professional education to our officers. The first examination for admission would reject many applicants, and the subsequent years of probation would clear off all the stupid, vicious, and insubordinate. Those who should pass the ordeal creditably, and enter the navy as midshipmen, would be of the greatest use by their own services, no less than by stimulating the efforts of their superiors. With such an institution, we might dispense entirely with the schools existing at the several naval stations, and also with the present worthless and utterly abortive system of schools on board ship, where, in many cases, the schoolmaster is the occasion of stimulating little other ingenuity, than that of playing tricks, at his own expense, which tricks, however subversive of discipline, are sometimes encouraged by the contemptuous and disparaging treatment pursued by commanders towards this class of officers..."

"In the mean time, and until the apprentice system can be made the means of completely manning the navy, we should be sorry to see our ships continue in port, and our navy prevented from taking that extension, which the protection of commerce requires, by the want of seamen to fill up their complements. Let our ships, now waiting for crews, fill up with any material they can get, so long as the number is complete, and sail. If they have sailors enough, petty officers included, to reef the maintop-sail, they can be taken care of from the first, and, in a few months of skilful training, will be able to perform every evolution creditably. The *Independence*, which spreads nearly as much canvass as the *Pennsylvania*, sailed from Boston, in 1837, with a crew of less than six hundred men, exclusive of officers. They were unusually young and light hands, and most of them entirely raw. Yet, from the moment of bending sails, there was no striking deficiency, and in a very few months the ship could enter into comparison, in the performance of evolutions, with the most practised cruisers. Any of the sloops, now waiting for crews, might perfectly well go to sea with three fourths of their crews composed of boys and landsmen. The difficulty of manning our ships, under the present system, would be much lessened, if the ships, returning from abroad, were to arrive in May and June, and those bound out to sail in July and August. The men would have a pleasant season to spend their hard-earned pay in, and would soon be ready to take service in the departing ships. Our ships, too, would approach and leave our coast in fine weather. The extensive mortality, which always occurs when ships are fitted out in the winter, and the many deaths which take place in the course of the cruise, clearly attributable to the same cause, might thus be avoided."

## 2. The Abduction of William Morgan, the Anti-Freemason movement, and John Canfield Spencer.

"One rap calls the lodge to order—one calls up the Junior and Senior Deacons—two raps call up all the subordinate officers, and three all members of the lodge.

The Master having called the lodge to order, and the officers all seated, the Master says to the Junior Warden, 'Brother Junior, are they all Entered Apprentice Masons in the south?'

Ans. 'They are, Worshipful.'

Master to the Senior Warden, 'Brother Senior, are they all Entered Apprentice Masons in the west?'

Ans. 'They are, Worshipful.'

The Master then says, 'They are, in the east,' at the same time he gives a rap with the common gavel or mallet, which calls up both Deacons.

Master to Junior Deacon, 'Brother Junior, the first care of a Mason?'

Ans. 'To see the lodge styled, Worshipful.'

Master to Junior Deacon, 'Attend to that part of your duty, and inform the Tyler that we are about to open a lodge of Entered Apprentice Masons, and direct him to tyle accordingly.' The Junior Deacon then steps to the door and gives three raps, which are answered by three raps from without; the Junior Deacon then gives one, which is also answered by the Tyler with one; the door is then partly opened and the Junior Deacon delivers his message, and resumes his situation and says, 'The door is tyed, Worshipful.' (at the same time giving the due-guard, which is never omitted when the Master is addressed.)

The Master to Junior Deacon, 'Brother, by whom?'

Ans. 'By a Master Mason without the door, armed with the proper implement of his office.'

Master to Junior Deacon, 'His duty there?'

Ans. 'To keep off all cowans and eaves-droppers, see that none pass or repass without permission from the Master.' (Some say without permission from the chair)..."

~ From William Morgan's *Illustrations of Freemasonry* (1827 edition).

Among the facts and circumstances that initially led me to seriously suspect a connection between criminal spirit people and the Somers "mutiny" was not at all the supernatural allusions made it by authors, such as I cited earlier (these, indeed, I encountered only afterward), but rather my becoming acquainted with John C. Spencer, Philip Spencer's father, and the part he performed as Special Prosecutor of the abductors of William Morgan. Morgan was a one-time mason who wrote an exposé on the clandestine rites and rituals of the freemasons. He was not the first or last to do such a thing, but in his case the impact on himself was swift, severe, and, as many believed, deadly. On Sept. 11, 1826, at the instigation of masons from his former lodge, Morgan was arrested in Batavia, N.Y. for debt and other charges, and then taken to Canadagua, N.Y. to be jailed. Later, during the night of the same day, men claiming to be his friends came to pay his debt and bail. Morgan was released and his seeming rescuers then whisked him away to Fort Niagara and which they arrived at the following day. Thereafter and from that point on, Morgan was ostensibly never seen or heard from again.

The case became a nationwide sensation, and was a catalyst in fomenting the vociferous anti-mason movement; which in turn culminated in the establishment of the Whig political party. The common view was that Morgan had been kidnapped, murdered, and his body done away with by freemasons punishing him for revealing freemasonry secrets. This was seemingly confirmed later by various witnesses and privately taken confessions; though never formally or legally substantiated. Some freemasons, on the other hand, attempted to account for Morgan's disappearance by saying he had been persuaded and bribed by some of their members to leave the country (to Canada or elsewhere); so that he would not embarrass them ever again – which, it is maintained, he willingly agreed to and did.<sup>11</sup>

What are or might be deemed ties or links between criminal spirit people and freemasonry generally will be considered by me as I proceed. This said, the Morgan case itself, and as one delves further into it, strongly suggests a possible connection with criminal spirit people. The vindictive, cunningly plotted, hidden, and (probably) murderous nature of the (reported) crime are or may be very much tell-tale signs of criminal spirit people, and their regular person henchmen, involvement. Criminal spirit people and their followers thrive on secrecy, and, like the mafia and who are in fact their offshoot, it is perfectly in keeping with their character and how they operate for them to resort to extreme measures in retaliating against and making an example of those who inform on or betray their confidence and necessarily concealed activities, and who otherwise are seen as threatening or assailing their interests. Such a one in the

<sup>11</sup> See *William Morgan, or Political Anti-Masonry, Its Rise Growth and Decadence* (1883) by Robert Morris. The author of this impressively lively, most interesting, and meticulously labored on, if not always persuasive, work makes a point of asserting that Morgan had been a one-time pirate, drunkard, evader of debts, betrayer, and an all around reprobate; who fully deserved the wrath he incurred; only that that wrath did not include his murder.

latter case may well have been John C. Spencer. In the course of prosecuting Morgan's accused abductors, with their ties to the freemasons, in 1829-1830, Spencer himself (as he claimed) had at least two attempts made on his life; while on another occasion, someone broke into his office and stole papers of his pertaining to the case and had them delivered to the opposing counsel. It is interesting to note as well than his son Philip was born and raised in Canandaigua, N. Y;<sup>12</sup> one the locations figuring in the Morgan abduction. If then Morgan was punished for revealing freemasonry secrets, is it not possible that Spencer, the one who vigorously prosecuted his abductors, might also have been made an object of revenge? And did perhaps this revenge include attacks on his family? And what greater revenge might such ruthless criminal have then in ensnaring and corrupting their opponent's son, and, moreover, attempt to convert him into being one of themselves?<sup>13</sup> Few or no regular persons would dream of something so cruel or sinister, and which, after all, would require utmost patience and certain kinds of psychological expertise to effect. An Archimago or ghost-magician, on the other hand, is and would be an ideal person for both desiring and having the ability to carry out such a wild and malignant scheme.

It is generally inferred or agreed that Philip, one of John C. Spencer's sons, suffered from some signal lapses and deficiencies in character. Among those that can be enumerated, it was a peculiarity of his to adopt and embrace masonic like codes and furtive methods of association; despite his father's pronounced anti-freemason stance. But more on Philip and his odd behaviors as we get on.

In one statement, dated Canandaigua, N. Y., July 16, 1830, he made against the freemasons, in this case at the time of his resigning in disgust as prosecutor due to lack of support and sundry untoward interference and impediments thrown in the path of his office, Spencer wrote:

"...During more than a year of most painful investigation, I did indeed become acquainted with the effects which that institution [freemasonry] had upon its votaries in this quarter. It has changed the character of some of our best citizens -- men who formerly would have been among the first in bringing to justice offenders against the laws, have virtually become the apologists of murderers and kidnappers. So far from aiding in their detection, our best citizens, magistrates and sheriffs, have interposed every obstacle in their power -- witnesses have been concealed and spirited away by them -- the guilty have been assisted in escaping, or if brought to trial, have been succored and sustained by money, by professional aid the best the country could afford, and by the presence and sanction of their brethren -- Masons, called as witnesses, have refused to testify in cases where they could not implicate themselves, and have submitted to fine and imprisonment in order to screen their brethren -- others more hardy have directly perjured themselves on the stand. When sitting as jurors they have utterly disregarded their duty and their oaths, and by obstinate perseverance have produced the acquittal of their brethren, or compelled the courts to discharge them. The very fountain of justice is polluted -- the conservative principle on which all depends, the obligation of a judicial oath, is corrupted. The power of the Fraternity is equal to its need. It reached our present Executive, who had once as a Judge applauded the spirit that was excited by the abduction of William Morgan, and converted him into an indifferent spectator of the means used to bring the offenders to justice. He disclosed my official confidential communications, in consequence of which my efforts were baffled and I was subjected to every species of obloquy. Nor has the Institution upon our Legislative bodies been less effectual..."<sup>14</sup>

Nor was Spencer alone in his consternation and belief that freemasonry was anti-law, anti-democracy, anti-nation, anti-religion, and anti-morals. Richard Rush, William Wirt, William Seward, Thurlow Weed, Thaddeus Stevens were also among the high profile legal and political minds who took up

---

<sup>12</sup> Canandaigua was founded where the chief village of the Seneca tribe, one of the six Iroquois nations displaced by the Revolutionary War, was situated. John C. Spencer at some point in 1843 was involved in efforts, evidently failed, to start a school for Native Americans. *The Letters of James Kirke Paulding*, edited by Ralph M. Aderman, p. 361. During the fighting before hand and the Sullivan Campaign itself of 1779 in which the Iroquois towns were conquered, there were devilish atrocities by both sides, including burning innocent people alive.

<sup>13</sup> For a historical instance of corrupting a political enemy's son and with which to compare, see the biography of Dion of Syracuse (408-354 B.C.), ch. 4, in Cornelius Nepos.

<sup>14</sup> *A Collection of Letters on Freemasonry* [with correspondence by John Canfield Spencer, Richard Rush, Henry Tatem], T. R. Marvin, Boston, 1849, pp. 3-6.

the cause against the masons. So too John Quincy Adams; who, in a letter to journalist and fellow anti-freemason William Leete Stone of 8 Dec. 1832, worth our inserting at length, stated:

"In a note appended to your publication of my first letter, you observe that eight or ten years ago, before you ever heard of Morgan, you proposed a revisal of the obligations, and that the barbarous penalties and language, complained of by me should be expunged. This is another Evidence to me of that rectitude of principles and soundness of judgment, which have preserved your heart and mind, from that almost universal depravation which it is the character of the Masonic Oaths, Obligations and Penalties generally to produce. It is known to be one of the most ordinary phenomena of insanity, that the sufferer is perfectly rational and intelligent upon every subject but one; and wherever that is touched upon, raving distracted. The Masonic History of the last seven years, has abundantly proved, that the Oaths, Obligations and Penalties, of that Institution, produce upon the immense majority of the men to whom they are administered, and by whom they are taken, a similar partial aberration from moral principle. They lose the moral sense in every thing relating to their Masonic Obligations, and retain it entire, or perhaps little impaired with respect to every thing else. This appears to me to account for the fact so portentously proved in the Morgan Murder transactions, that multitudes of men otherwise of fair characters and blameless lives were deeply and awfully implicated in that horrible Calendar of Crimes. It accounts also for the fact of that desperate adherence of so many otherwise honest men to those barbarous, absurd and abominable Oaths, Obligations and Penalties. For it is to them that the high minded men of the fraternity now declare that they will cling to the last gasp of their existence. To this fact I wish to point your special attention. It is against these Oaths, Obligations and Penalties, and against them alone, that the pure and disinterested Spirit of Anti Masonry is arranged. The abolition of them is the great moral reformation which Anti Masonry has undertaken to accomplish, and from which I trust it will not swerve. With the Oaths and Obligations, the Secrets fall of course, and all those being abandoned if the Free Masons wish to continue as a charitable, benevolent and convivial fraternity, no mortal on earth will object to their so doing.

"The Oaths, Obligations and Penalties therefore now constitute the only matter at issue between Masonry and Anti Masonry. And I ask you if an aberration of intellect, as well as of moral feeling more monstrous can be imagined, than the inflexible adherence to the determination that they will continue to swear men upon the penalties of having their throats cut from ear to ear -- of cutting open the left breast and tearing out the heart and vitals, of severing the body in two, and of smiting off the skulls that they will never reveal to any one under the Canopy of Heavens Secrets, which have been divulged and proclaimed on the housetops. And this, in the name of the living God! I have endeavored to show that the administration of these Oaths was vicious, when it was to keep secrets that were secret. But now -- that they are known to every one who will read -- what is it but a blasphemous taking of the name of God in vain?

"In your letter of the 28th ulto. you do emphatically declare it as still your earnest desire to destroy this wretched structure of Free Masonry, and I give you the most unqualified credit for sincerity in this declaration. But will you allow me in friendship and in confidence to say, that some of your strictures in your paper, upon the Anti Masons, since the disappointment of the late Elections [Anti Masonic presidential nominee William Wirt won only 7.8% of the popular vote], has led not me but some of them, to doubt your attachment to their cause. I do earnestly wish them to be sensible as I am that your book is the best Anti Masonic book that ever was published. They differed from you with regard to the Candidates for the Presidency and Vice Presidency; but now that the Election is over, cannot you pursue with them the common object; which is to prevail upon the Free Masonry to do, that which you urged them to do, even before the fate or the offence of Morgan, had arisen in the series of events.

"Remember that it is in the power of the Masonic Fraternity to demolish the whole system of political Anti Masonry forever. To effect this object the single thing they have to do, is to cease administering the entered Apprentice's Oath. It would follow of course that they would administer none of the others. Let them do this, and they will never again have an Anti Masonic Candidate to oppose or defeat them.

"To come now to your letter of the 30th ulto. I have not received from the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge, a copy of the printed minutes of their proceedings in June last. In the great object of

prevailing upon the Masons voluntarily to abandon their Idol, I have felt curiosity to ascertain how far it has a prospect of success.

"Having left your Book at my residence at Quincy I am not able from more recollection to refer to the several circumstances mentioned in your narrative whereas I drew the inference that (the conspiracy for the kidnapping and murder of Morgan, originated in the Chapter at Rochester). But I think you say that (it was there, Morgan had been admitted to the Royal Arch degree) at the proposal of James Ganson. You say it was there also that on the formation of the Chapter the forms of admission had been introduced from the old manuscript of which you gave me a copy. Being the forms which had been used by judge Hosmer, in Connecticut. You intimate also that it was from there that Morgan had copied the obligations as they are published in his book. It occurred to me then that (the Chapter at Rochester was the one that he had specially offended) and that which in Masonic Law was responsible for the suppression of his Book. The Masons at Batavia had discovered that he and Shiller were preparing for the publication of the Book, which it was their great object to suppress. But Morgan was not one of them. They had excluded him from their Chapter, in a most offensive manner, by getting up a second Petition, without his name, and without assigning any reason for his exclusion after having obtained a Charter for a Chapter by a petition in which he had joined. He did not belong therefore to the Chapter at Batavia, nor was it there that he had obtained the means of divulging the Secrets, but at Rochester. It was then the Chapter at Rochester which became responsible for the suppression of the Book and for the punishment of the proposed publisher (It was the obligation administered to him by them that he was about to violate, and it was for them and them along to convict and punish him).

"Hence also I inferred the extraordinary agency of James Ganson in the conspiracy--he having been the Sponsor of Morgan at his admission to the Royal Arch degree. The conspiracy embraced two objects -- the suppress the Book and to punish the author. It is apparent that the transportation of Morgan to Niagara had been previously concerted at the Chapter in Rochester. That by their direction he had been seized at Batavia by a party from Canandaigua, carried there and lodged in prison, to be exactly in such position that he might at the moment of his liberation, be unlawfully seized and transported whither they should direct. For this direction the nightly journey of Loton Lawson from Canandaigua to Rochester, and his return early the next morning was affected. He was followed by men charged with executing the Instruction of the Chapter; and the carriages for his transportation to the fort of Niagara had been all prepared and arranged before hand. The Chapters at Batavia and LeRoy were the informers against Morgan (The Lodge at Canandaigua undertook to arrest, and deliver him up to the Chapter at Rochester, and they were to consummate the Punishment precisely because it was to and by them that his Masonic vows had been made). Mr. Whittlesey informs me of another fact not noticed in your book -- That (after Morgan was lodged in the fort at Niagara; another messenger was sent to Rochester and returned thence before he was put to death. That the messenger bore this Order from the Chapter I cannot doubt)...”<sup>15</sup>

Yet if John C. Spencer was so cruelly targeted and attacked, why were not other of these anti-freemasons as well? For one, I myself don't know that they weren't necessarily. The question requires additional research and digging that, at present, I am not in a position to further pursue.<sup>16</sup> But even granted that other anti-freemasons were retaliated against, there may have been, unknown to us, particular reasons for making Spencer a special victim; which is to say his being an anti-freemason may have been only one of a number of reasons he and his family were, as we speculate, made victims of vindictive retaliation.

Is there then (we can and should take this occasion to ask) something inherently corrupting and underhanded, even evil, about freemasonry? Before attempting to explain this, let's ask a similar and related question. Is there something inherently corrupt and underhanded about conventional religion? While both questions are not altogether identical in their import and ramifications, the answer is otherwise the same; namely, no, and of course, neither, freemasonry or conventional religion are necessarily or

---

<sup>15</sup> This reproduced letter came from the original; at the time of my finding it, in an autograph dealer's collection/inventory, and is not included in John Quincy Adams *Letters on the Masonic Institution* (1833).

<sup>16</sup> We might however note that one of John Quincy Adams' own sons, George Washington Adams (1801-1829) came to a mysterious and untimely end, and believed a suicide. William Wirt, strangely enough, could be said to have been made to suffer when sometime in the 1970's someone broke into his tomb and stole his skull, but which was later recovered. See *Washington Post*, Oct. 20, 2005, "Tale From the Crypt Or, How to Get a Head in Politics Without Really Trying," by Peter Carlson.

intrinsically corrupt and underhanded institutions. And yet it is not difficult to appreciate that either may, under certain circumstances and when certain persons are involved, be used and made corrupt and underhanded; all the more so when the persons in question are criminal spirit people and their acolytes.

Furthermore (and religion aside), freemasonry for its part has the added drawback of mystically invoking religious associations, such as the Divine Architect or the Supreme Being, while pretending to be non-denominational as such, and which, for practical purposes, is a potentially and hugely hazardous course to be taking. Although it is usually harmless and all right to speak of “God” or “Divine Providence” in the abstract for purposes of philosophy, rhetoric, or special civic occasions (such, for instance, as a holiday), the question as to quite who and what we mean when we say God or Divine Providence is by no means a trivial or light matter; so that it is in this, combined with a penchant for solemn secrecy, irrevocable oaths of obedience, and pretensions to numinous understanding, that masonic orders engaged in such behaviors are involved in something fraught with extreme danger; not least of which when we factor in the likelihood of dishonest and criminal spirit people being present or involved, on some level or other, in their activities.

And yet were not many famous and admired men in history, including many of the founding fathers, freemasons? Does this not make them reprehensible? This is not an easy question to answer for a number of reasons. On the face of it, we can probably and safely assume that such notables, if they were as reported actually freemasons, sincerely meant well, and if anything blatantly bad or untoward occurred in the lodges and brotherhoods they belonged to, they would not have condoned such. On the other hand, and in spite of their individual good intentions, they *may* have (in a given instance) mixed themselves up in a situation and fraternal gathering which had underlying it and *unbeknownst to them* someone or something dark and sinister. But there are at least two obvious problems that arise. (1) Was such the case, and if so how would we know it? And (2) was the person(s) in question actually a freemason at all? What evidence proves it? And if they were, what was the extent and nature of their participation? Bear in mind that if, as seems probable, some lodges (if only a small few) in the United States (and elsewhere) *were* infiltrated and tainted with criminal spirit people insinuating and inveigling themselves through certain of the lodge’s members, there would be a matter of fact tendency of some people, both for and against the masonic orders, to infer or assume the order’s contact and association with the supernatural; or, as they saw it in a given instance the “divine” or else “diabolical.” As fraud and hoaxes are part of the stealthy stock and trade of criminal spirit people and their adherents, it may be that some famous people who have been claimed to have been freemasons, but were not in truth so, and proof of their alleged membership is, one might at least in theory discover, based on false claims and or spurious evidence; such as, for example, forged documents. How then, assuming the possibility, are such potential deceptions to be seen through and uncovered? And even if there is no issue as to an individual’s membership, how can we be sure as to what that person did as a freemason or what they knew about the order and the doings of its members (such as doings pertained to the order?) The challenges in answering such questions, and given the often surreptitious practices and proceedings of lodges are, needless to say, no little daunting.

To compound matters, in some circumstances persons may have been encouraged to join a lodge fraternity with the idea of getting them mixed up with or placed under the influence of spirit people; though they themselves had no desire whatsoever of the sort. Alternatively, they may have known or come to learn of the spirit person or persons being part of the group’s hierarchy, but were led to believe they were benevolent.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, some members, again with all good intention, might join a masonic order without or only later realizing some of its members were involved with spirit people -- and to that extent it could be said they were ensnared into participating in something they might else have found repugnant (that is, had they known what was actually going on.) And, as you might gather, there are all kinds of other scenarios and variations to be conceived -- made all the more possible by an order’s penchant for secrecy and arcane codes of conduct. I don’t mean to suggest all or even most masonic orders were or are afflicted with infiltration by spirit persons and their henchmen; yet if only one or a few were it is easy to see what misunderstandings or confusion might have resulted, both at the time and subsequently (including with

---

<sup>17</sup> Goethe, be it recollect, was a freemason. But then Goethe wrote *Faust I* and *II*, and in which, after all, the devil himself is painted with some amount of sympathy and justification. Mozart also was a freemason. But does this mean there is something latently suspicious, even devilish, about *The Magic Flute*? And other actual and putative freemasons similarly, etc.

respect to historical perspective on the given individual *and* the order they are said to have been a member of.)

Notwithstanding the ineluctable and felonious threat some practitioners of freemasonry posed, the anti-freemason movement in early 19<sup>th</sup> century America, for all its vehement and strident stance and declamation, ultimately lost momentum and petered out; because: 1) one cannot find or forge a lasting cause and purpose based merely and predominantly on a negative sentiment, and 2) given our claim, the problem was not necessarily freemasonry per se; rather it was criminal spirit people (and their followers) in *some* instances, perhaps involved in it.

### **3. Philip Spencer and the Spencer Family.**

“J. W. Wales [the *Somers*’ Purser’s Steward] recalled...

Q. Was not the conduct of Mr. Spencer generally wayward or eccentric, or otherwise?

A. I don’t know, sir; I noticed sometimes he was rather singular, dull, stupid!<sup>18</sup>

Q. Did, or did not any sense of danger cross your mind, while so many officers were below deck in council?

A. Yes, sir, it did; at dark the Commander ordered them upon deck; he was apprehensive of danger.”

~ *Proceedings of the Naval Court Martial in the Case of Alexander Slidell Mackenzie*, p. 26.

It would doubtless be an immense assistance in understanding Philip Spencer to know and find out more about his immediate family. No one, for example, to my knowledge has looked very closely into how its individual members took his death. And it is with some regret undertaking such as study as this that I do not have available to me family papers, including much of any of John C. Spencer’s public correspondence; which if I had I am inclined to think would help to shed additional light on Philip and what happened to him.

Elizabeth (also Elza) Scott Smith Spencer, Philip’s mother, is said by McFarland to have died within a few years of 1841,<sup>19</sup> yet we can here correct this and have it noted that on the contrary she lived long after, surviving her husband into 1868.

In addition to Philip, she had two other sons. One was John C. Spencer, Jr; who became a purser in the U.S. Navy, and died of fever while on duty aboard the U.S. sloop *Marion* on Dec. 29, 1845. At the time of the news outbreak on the *Somers* hangings, one report accused him of being a forger,<sup>20</sup> and it was rumored by an Ithaca newspaper, wrongly or rightly, that in order to spare him prosecution for this his father got him into the navy. These sorts of charges, however, brought forth from family friends stout disavowals, and who vehemently maintained his honorable character.

Philip’s other and older brother was Ambrose C. Spencer (1814 [or 1817]-1876). To be frank, I would have little opportunity to uncover much about Ambrose were it not for Robert Scott Davis’ fascinating and tremendous *Ghosts and Shadows of Andersonville: Essays on the Secret Social Histories of America’s Deadliest Prison*.<sup>21</sup> In the chapter “What the Witness Never Told,” pp. 163-179, Davis recounts Ambrose’s life, and which included the latter’s acting as a witness at the trial of Henry Wirtz, the commandant of Andersonville prison. Taken in all, Ambrose’s sojourn in this mortal realm sounds so inordinately crazy and at cross-purposes that one wonders if Davis, after all, didn’t get some of his facts wrong. This, however, is less a comment on the author’s integrity as much as it describes one’s bewildered reaction to what he imparts. Davis ascribes to Ambrose, among other points in the chronology we might mention, “alienation of mind;” that Ambrose reportedly fled from prosecution for scores of forgeries; became secretary of a Masonic lodge (like Philip, rebelling against his father’s philosophy); was excluded from his father’s will and who wholly disinherited him; is said to have lied in important matters on several

<sup>18</sup> Midshipman Henry Rodgers, however and possibly in response to Wales’ derogatory assessment quoted here, said he thought Spencer “mature...intelligent and better informed than most young men who had entered the service as lately as he had.” CM p. 129.

<sup>19</sup> MSD p. 245.

<sup>20</sup> HSM p. 3; quoting *N.Y. Express*, Dec 17, 1842, in turn reprinted from the *Chicago Express*, Dec. 29, 1842; though it may be that Ambrose C., not his and Philip’s brother John C., Jr., was the more properly intended object of the forgery accusation.

<sup>21</sup> Like McFarland, Davis at one point remarks on the fanatical nature of the anti-Freemason and *Somers* era: “These movements [referring to the apocalyptic fervor that accompanied the William Morgan kidnapping and disappearance] created among other faiths and ideals, the Spiritualists, the Primitive Baptists, the Women’s movement [sic], and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” *Ghosts and Shadows of Andersonville*, pp. 167-168.

occasions, including on behalf of the prosecution in the Wirtz trial; was guilty of bigamy and which last caused someone to shoot and murder him in 1876. Yet for all this he was also a reputedly astute and hard working lawyer, author, and lecturer.

Philip was born in Canandaigua on January 28, 1823, and though newspapers routinely spoke of him as a young man of 19, he was in truth only 18 at the time of his death. His earliest years, as alluded to earlier, found him growing up in surroundings at and very nearby to where the excitement of the William Morgan incident and case had and were taking place.

As we know or is nor difficult to imagine, at times the pride of very well to do children sometimes gives them to think of themselves as persons of authority; feeling as they do that born into high and respectable circumstances the race of life is already in large measure done and attained. They have for nothing what others strive a lifetime for and yet never have or realize. This inborn sense of entitlement and superiority was apparently a factor in Philip's reported reckless and occasionally violent arrogance. Such, at any rate, would perhaps help explain why he allowed himself to be held back three years in his first stint at college; while seeming to have no real sense of calling or ambition. His stays at Geneva (now Hobart) college in 1838, and later Union College (in Schenectady, N.Y. – his father's alma mater) were largely failures and, presumably, an embarrassment to his parents. At Union, evincing an enthusiasm for masonic like codes, handshakes, and initiations, he helped found the Chi Psi fraternity there, and which adopted them. Although some fellow students averred him to be naturally intelligent; for example, he was said to be gifted at picking up Greek and Latin; and, during and after college, he sometimes displayed a good sense of humor,<sup>22</sup> was spoken of as being open handed and generous, he was otherwise and generally seen as an idle and aimless sort of person; with little or no focused sense of life direction. Morose, rebellious, discontented, morbidly sensitive, and in many instances sensitive to slights to the point of being physically violent is how he is frequently described by some of those who knew him. If Mackenzie is to be believed, Philip's mother, in letters to him (which Mackenzie confiscated some time after his arrest), called him a "thief, villain, and liar." He was known to have shown an interest in pirates, and later was attracted by the idea of being on a slaver (a ship carrying slaves from Africa) – even though his father was an abolitionist. Robert C. Rogers, who'd known him as a midshipman, presented this sketch many years later (and published in 1890):

"During Spencer's service on that station I held a certain intimacy with him, close enough to observe those mental and moral characteristics which display themselves without mask or domino among youngsters, especially when these latter meet in a foreign country where all is rare and strange to inexperienced eyes. I have met him on board of his ship, but with more frequency on shore, where there are fewer limitations to spontaneity, fewer curbs on a lymphatic constitution yet in adolescence. As a rule, he appeared to eschew an association with officers of his own grade. Mine was an unaccustomed face, and he found me unprejudiced by the generally unfavorable criticisms I had heard of him. He saw that I preferred to take my own measure of him rather than to accept that of others, which, especially with young people, and young people of a steerage afloat, are neither disinterested nor impartial, warped by professional jealousy and rivalry, independent of the truism that one officer is rarely just and judicious in weighing the character of another, when, too, judge and judged are contemporary and competitive."

"He was a person in his rare normal moods not without congruous and intelligent activity and observation. He had derived advantages from the generous educational opportunities a fond and accomplished father had offered him. He had a fair acquaintance with the humanities, spoke Spanish with fluency, even if it were, in some phrases, marred by grammatical blunders; had retained somewhat of his hold on Latin and Greek, and was a tolerably experienced draughtsman. These attainments, while they made him, when he pleased, a pleasant and plausible companion, infrequently restrained a nature which appeared to be absolutely bereft of all conservative principle. He always impressed me as having an inbred, if not an inborn, inclination, I will not say to crime, but to the vicious at least. It was not by any means an eccentricity in the sense of whimsical, but a vagation so listless, indifferent, as to lead one to plunder a hen-roost or a house. He had had, as he told me, religious example and culture enough during his early years;

---

<sup>22</sup> Spencer was, it was said, "surly" toward fellow *Somers'* officers, and likewise he was treated by them as an outsider. But with the crew, remembered Midshipman Matthew C. Perry Jr., Philip was "continually laughing and joking." CI p. 26.

but it was all a mere matter of memory without any potency to shape, control, and exalt his maturer life. Indeed, it is only true when I say that a more unbalanced, vacillating, and easily-corrupted nature I have never encountered. Besides, he had not that quality of mind which forelooks, which measures responsibilities, and calculates consequences. If I had proposed to him to break into the Imperial Treasury, he would not first have made a careful reconnaissance, computed probabilities, prepared plans, corrupted guardians, but blindly would have butted his head against barred windows, or knocked down the sentinel, wholly forgetful of the fact that within were a corporal's guard and heavy imperforable plates of iron and steel inclosing the treasures. It was that irreflection which shut his eyes to the infeasibleness of the conspiracy which cost him his life.

"He was of that irresolute and arbitrary temperament which frets and rebels under the restraints and limitations society imposes for its own conservation. He would have resolved things to that primitive and barbarous freedom or anarchy which left all individuals free to do as they pleased, with no check beyond that interposed by other persons of a greater strength and prowess. To his licentiousness in that regard there would be joy and fascination in riding roughshod over the ways and methods law and ethics have been at such pains to establish and preserve. He would have infracted an ordinance simply because it was such, and because it interfered with that natural liberty which no human regulation had any right to repress or intermeddle with. These, of course, were very silly notions, and denoted a very wicked or weak mind, in which latter category I am disposed to place him. And yet I observed in him on several occasions acts which led me to carry to his account qualities beyond mere moral infirmities, rather to a thorough lack of conscientiousness, or, as Shakespeare has it, 'a most inherent baseness....'"<sup>23</sup>

But these are reports about someone based on how they were seen *in their youth*; the preponderance of which come from enemies or else people who didn't particularly care for him – including Robert C. Rogers just quoted. And as a scapegoat offered up on behalf and defense of a Navy scandalized (or at least potentially scandalized) by the executions, Spencer's death was justified and cheered by some – irregardless of any real or imagined mutiny! We must therefore be more than a little careful before assuming out of hand, as some did and would have, that Philip Spencer was nothing more than a hopelessly frivolous and worthless sort who could never have amounted to anything good. Even notables like Washington Irving and William Cullen Bryant had occasion in later years to make excuses for and rue missteps in their own youth. So that that perhaps, had he lived, Spencer might also have finally come round to becoming a mature adult himself.

As much as anything else that could be said about him, he seemed to have wanted to get away from it all. Was this because he was weary of the demands of self-discipline and conventional standards of success? Felt he others were trying to manipulate him? Did possibly (and it won't hurt to ask) an unknown other plague and or encourage in him these attitudes; while at the same time making his life at home and college unusually strained and uncomfortable than it else would have been? At any rate and despite his privileged upbringing, like Richard Henry Dana, Jr., he attempted to go to sea as an ordinary seaman. An acquaintance of his recalled:

"...The [Nantucket] ship that he was to embark on not being ready, he remained some time on the island. During this time, and previous to the gale of October, 1841, he volunteered to go out on the banks in a small vessel for what the whalersmen denominate the Black Fish, and in that gale came near being lost...He smiled at my astonishment at deserting his happy, luxurious and delightful home, and now as I look back, as often as I have since, I think of that smile of Spencer...that smile was not human! The wild rolling of his eyes told plainly enough, to any one at all discerning, that something was wrong working in that heart that could not submit to the dull monotony of this peaceful every day life..."<sup>24</sup>

Following his abortive effort to go to sea on his own, his influential father secured him a coveted midshipman's commission, and he reported to the New York Naval Yard in Nov. 1841. But how willingly

---

<sup>23</sup> "Some Reminiscences of Philip Spencer and the Brig 'Somers,'" *United States*, N.S. IV (July 1890), pp. 25-26, by Robert C. Rogers.

<sup>24</sup> HSM p. 14, from the N.Y. *Weekly Tribune*, Dec. 24, 1842. The person speaking is possibly Midshipman William Craney and with whom Spencer had disputes and a falling out.

or enthusiastically he first received it isn't said. What we do know is that before long he got into trouble for fighting and getting intoxicated, and after a further while expressed a desire to leave the Navy altogether. In this, and in light of what happened later, perhaps it could be said, and given his refractory attitude, he showed good, level headed sense; and despite the litany of contumely spoken of him. He sought to resign and did try also, with Mackenzie's help, to get transferred from the *Somers* to the *Grampus*.<sup>25</sup> Yet in both cases forces were at work preventing and hindering him. Were his father, Secretary of the Navy Upshur, or Commodore Perry,<sup>26</sup> as they well mighty appear, necessarily the ultimate and only obstacles and interference preventing him from escaping duty aboard the already overly manned *Somers*?

It may well be that Spencer's misconduct on board the *Somers* was engaged in with the intent to get himself kicked out of the Navy. In their court testimonies, Sgt. Garty, Purser Heiskell, and Midshipman Tillotson and Apprentice John Cavenagh all recalled Spencer stating, directly or in effect, that he didn't plan to be long in the service.<sup>27</sup> It is conceivable therefore that Spencer saw getting himself into a trouble on the *Somers* as means of making it easier for him to receive his previously refused discharge.

#### 4. The Voyage.

"The Somers had a peculiar crew; substantially one of apprentices. Of 120 souls on board, 96 were under age. Boys can not govern boys..."

~ James Fenimore Cooper, *Review of "The Proceedings of the Naval Court Martial of Alexander Slidell Mackenzie,"* p. 332.

Before attempting to apply the idea or theory of a literal ghost (or ghosts) being a direct participant and prime instigator in what took place on board the U.S. brig *Somers* in late Autumn 1842, it is necessary to repeat and state a few things.

When a spirit person communicates directly with a regular (i.e., flesh and blood) person, they usually do so by speaking to them in their thoughts. One could speak at length and in much greater detail on the subject than I am prepared to do here as to exactly how this is effected. But for our purposes a general summary and description, it is my belief, will suffice. When we refer to a spirit person who can communicate to someone, we mean a spirit person of certain high skill, expertise, and power of influence; namely a ghost-magician, such as I mentioned previously. It is or might be possible to speak of angels or "gods" having this sort of ability, yet to avoid needlessly complicating matters, we'll restrict ourselves to the notion of a magician-ghost. When such telepathically intimates with a regular person, it is most usually done in and by way of the recipient's cognitive thoughts in their head, say rather than audibly, or emotionally, or spiritually within; and where (spoken or nuncupative; as opposed to seen or written) words, visuals images or both are used as a medium of telepathic conversation, and by which means a regular person recipient can to some degree speak in response to the ghost. Although it is possible for the regular person to see the ghost with their eyes as the ghost speaks to them, it is by no means requisite that the ghost be visible to be heard from or spoken to; and of course by this we mean to say that a ghost might be present but be invisible to the eye. A person then might be in a kind of discussion with a ghost (including that person speaking vocally/telepathically to the ghost), and yet another person, unaware of what was transpiring, viewing them at a distance might not see or notice anything at all amiss going on. Topics or subject matter can also be conveyed in sleeping dreams as well as conscious or waking thoughts. Furthermore, a magician-ghost can use other people, animals, and external objects to impart a message or one sort or other. A good example of this, familiar to us from ancient history, might be the use of birds; such as the eagle bearing aloft an unwieldy serpent in *The Iliad* bespeaking the doom of the Trojans; implying by this that a magician-ghost can, under certain circumstances, command and use people and

<sup>25</sup> We must be careful, nevertheless, not necessarily to make too dramatic about this; as according to Midshipman Tillotson and seaman Charles Sibley's accounts, Philip wanted to be transferred to the *Grampus* merely in order to have additional time to take care of some unfinished business in New York, see CM pp. 169, 172. In the *New York Herald*, Dec. 21, 1842, it was rumored that before leaving on Mackenzie's brig, a young lady had "gilted" him. HSM p. 10. If true, it may have been that unrequited love was one of Philip's woes; rendering him that much more reckless and irascible on board the *Somers*.

<sup>26</sup> Mackenzie, pointing at Spencer suspended from the yard arm, is apparently reported to have declared, and perhaps cryptically: "Commodore Perry had not taken the responsibility of removing that young man from the brig, but he had of hanging him." CM p. 160.

<sup>27</sup> Spencer's remark to Garty to this effect came on Nov. 20<sup>th</sup> -- CM pp. 119, 124. See also CM pp. 33, 158, 167-168, 171, 221.

animals to act or perform on his behalf, and thus communicate with a given recipient by means of them. Although I don't specifically recognize the use of such intermediaries as being utilized in the *Somers* case (aside, say, from something like using Spencer himself to bribe or purchase favor from crew members), it is nonetheless, worth remarking to give you a more complete idea of the means of communication *certain kinds* of spirit persons (for not all spirit person are so capable) might have at their disposal to prompt, incite, manipulate, or otherwise get their message across.

They can walk, or in exceptional instances fly, or at least have means of making themselves aerial, and hover in the air. How and by what means I frankly could not tell you or account for; other than to suggest there is perhaps a medium like ether that makes it possible for them to float about and be buoyant. Such ether might also conceivably be made or become a conduit and or conducting substance that makes telepathy and thought transference possible.

How might a ghost-magician speak or what might he say? It is to be understood that a ghost-magician as much as anything is a kind of con-artist and confidence trickster, and thus will address someone in a manner best calculated to persuade them. Whether this means being frightening, intimidating, consoling, encouraging, empathizing, reasoning, all depends on who the person is that is being spoken to and what sort of reaction the spirit person would educe from them. How would a regular person interpret the ghost's identity? The ghost might present himself by name, anonymously, and or possibly masquerade as someone (thinking here of perhaps a religious personage of some sort) who the regular person would out of hand respect or would assume was being of divine or divine-like importance; so that to the regular person the ghost might be anything from himself (his real identity, say "Archimago"), to the ghost of Blackbeard, to Apollo, to Jesus,<sup>28</sup> to a messenger of "God," or just about whomever you will that that regular person would deem as someone who could inspire confidence and be trusted.

When a ghost attempts to influence events he might do so imminently, say by direct command to an individual, or else by subtle or subliminal persuasion which leaves the person to decide for themselves to act or not act; it being better, between the two, if the regular person commits an error or crime out of their own relatively free choice than if, somehow, they are otherwise compelled or violently induced to it. For the more guilty a person becomes the less guilty is the ghost-magician and the more easily the former can be controlled by him.

In the case of the *Somers*, the magician-ghost that I hypothecate being involved was an agent provocateur who sought to corrupt both the officers and crew, and by this means lead them to acts of extreme folly and rashness. What would have actuated him? This is not so easy to say. For one thing, a magician-ghost might be driven by lust like a sexual predator or a desire for amusement and excitement; so that his satisfaction is merely of a prurient nature. Alternatively or in addition, he may have sought revenge (say out of jealousy or punishment for conduct he felt deserved his disapproval) and or as a political measure. If then, for instance, the Spencers, Slidell Mackenzie, and the United States Navy (and in turn the United States) were all made to suffer and or look the worse after what happened on the *Somers*, it is not inconceivable that harm to any, some, or all of them might well have been his intention. Or possibly this was not, as such, his own personal motive, but rather he was formally employed and hired by someone else (say another more puissant and higher ranking spirit person) to bring about these destructive ends.

One phenomena that stands out in the events that took place on board the *Somers* was a seemingly intangible force at work dividing the officers from the crew; as if, as Mackenzie evidently interpreted to be the case, there was a muted, yet volatile, contest and referendum transpiring in which the crew was being asked to choose between either Spencer or the captain. Based on what I am proposing here, one might surmise that it was the magician-ghost who was that force. To achieve this, he would encourage in such as Spencer the idea that the captain was a self-righteous "granny," overly proud; while at the same time weak in character and ineffectual at heart. Simultaneously, he would seek to agitate and frighten the captain with the seemingly insidious effect of Spencer (in reality the ghost himself) on the crew's loyalty and discipline. Other players then, the ghost similarly probing and identifying their frailties and points of susceptibility,

---

<sup>28</sup> The "Christ" spirit person who, it is reported, appeared and spoke to the Sioux at their Ghost Dances and deceived them prior to events that culminated in the Wounded Knee massacre could be reasonably construed as one instance of such invidious impersonation.

could and would be influenced and provoked along either of these same core lines. It seems not at all unlikely then that at the magician's careful prompting and meticulous manipulation, Spencer was taunting and tempting Mackenzie, and in the process creating a situation for Mackenzie to face (at least as deceived Mackenzie saw it) not so unlike that of William Golding's castaway juvenile islanders gone crazy in *The Lord of the Flies*. But when Mackenzie called the bluff, it was of course not the magician he found out, but Spencer -- the latter himself a dupe as well as Mackenzie.

Leaving aside bizarre events that unfolded, the cruise of the *Somers* was singular in itself; being the inauguration of what was intended to be a new and novel program of the Navy's design to educate and train recently enlisted personnel, including young boys in their early teens. Out of a total crew of 120<sup>29</sup> (this numbers includes officers), some 100 were 18 years or under. Of the 14 officers present only three were commissioned, viz., Mackenzie, Lieut. Guert Gansevoort, Midshipman Matthew Calbraith Perry Jr. (acting as sailing master, and, in effect, third in command), and the rest were petty and warrant officers (including a surgeon still suffering from the effects of a bout of yellow fever), unpassed midshipmen, and a sickly single marine sergeant without any marines to command.

Prior to embarking, several peculiar and perhaps suspicious events were later reported to have occurred. According to Gunner's mate Henry King, Spencer smuggled liquor aboard by means of seaman Elisha Small and chief boatswain's mate Samuel A. Cromwell. Outside of certain officers' use, it was intended that there was to be no drinking on the ship, which naturally only increased boredom and latent tensions which ship's grog was ordinarily served on board a ship to alleviate. While we might think it salutary to discourage drinking, particularly among young men, even so lack of such a traditional and commonly accepted sedative or tranquilizer would usually make a magician-ghosts tasks easier; because the liquor might better numb his subject to suggestion; not to mention stress, tension, and anxiety that the magician-ghost desired to foment or exacerbate. Spencer's bringing in liquor then may arguably have been something he himself wanted to do without need of another's, in this case the magician's, prompting. The act, while disobedient and censurable, did not necessarily imply any other purpose than emotional and physical pleasure and indulgence.

Spencer was also said by Gunner's mate King to have paid out cash to Small and Cromwell, and after a few days out at sea additional money to the latter.<sup>30</sup> The reason for these payments is not known, but it is perhaps to be inferred that this was to reimburse them for the liquor and or as an inducement by Spencer to win Small and Cromwell's confidence, and per chance as well (doubtless, as Mackenzie might conclude) to help purchase their allegiance against the captain. Again, was this merely Spencer at work, or something another suggested he should do? We, of course, have no means of knowing per se.

More alarmingly, King, and also crew members Daniel McKinley and Charles A. Wilson,<sup>31</sup> before the *Somers* departed New York, saw or heard suggestions that there would be a mutiny.<sup>32</sup> McKinley in particular testified that Cromwell had said he thought there would be a mutiny on board the upcoming cruise. Assuming McKinley reported correctly, was Cromwell merely expressing his contempt of the captain, and with whom he has sailed previously? Did he himself have designs of mutiny? In tandem with Spencer? Or did possibly our magician-ghost overtly or, more likely, subliminally (as occurs with *déjà vu*) communicate to Cromwell; in effect, predicting supernaturally that there would be trouble? Once more, we are left to guess, but the foregoing may, or may not, be possible explanations.

But more to the point, was a mutiny intended in advance, say by the magician? As before, we simply don't know. Yet it seems offhand that such an actual and deliberate scheme to bring about mutiny on board a United States Navy warship was doubtful. For one, who would lead it? 18 year old, dreamy, drunken, and jaw singing Philip Spencer? Not very likely. And yet the magician-ghost probably did -- at least -- and using Spencer have plans in advance to create, in the captain's mind, the verisimilitude and appearance of a mutiny. For which purpose, some of those later arrested and put in irons by Mackenzie

<sup>29</sup> 30 more crew members than she should have had notes Cooper.

<sup>30</sup> CM p. 138.

<sup>31</sup> McKinley, a former waiter at a hotel, rated as a landsman; while Wilson, who'd been forced into the naval service by a judge's sentence, was a butcher and sailmaker's mate.

<sup>32</sup> CM pp. 141-142, CI pp. 45, 54.

may have been planted in the crew by the magician (a relatively easy thing to do), and Mackenzie by acting as he did to arrest them may have been right in sensing or detecting something strangely wrong about some, if not strictly all, of them; and despite his having personally hand picked most of the crew before hand; which, if such was the case, can be seen as reflecting (and confirming Poe<sup>33</sup>) Slidell's uncanny knack for noticing small details, in this case of certain crew member's less than sincere personalities. Only what kept him from detecting the same earlier? If such seaman of dubious sincerity were planted in the crew, what it is they themselves actually knew or what was expected of them, we can but conjecture. Yet, in fairness, it may well have been that they themselves were not even aware that they were planted.

Although the first weeks out after embarking from New York harbor were relatively uneventful, and that the crew's discipline and promptness obeying orders during this period was, all in all, above reproach, Mackenzie rather strangely adopted a ready zeal for flogging; with 43 such taking place in a span of three weeks between New York and Funchal in Madeira. To get a sense of how excessive Mackenzie's proclivity for flogging was during the cruise, we need only compare his record on the *Somers* in late 1842 with that of earlier U.S. naval commanders. The following abstract of reported shipboard punishments is taken from Christopher McKee's *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession* pp. 480-481 (see also 240-247.)

\* Isaac Chauncey, U.S. *John Adams*, crew of 122 men, 15 floggings between Oct 1804-Feb 1805 – or 119 days.

\* David Porter, U.S. *Enterprize*, crew of 113 men, 22 floggings between Aug. 1805-Nov. 1806 – or 454 days.

\* James Biddle, U.S. *Hornet*, crew of 111 men, 7 floggings between Jan-July 1815 – or 183 days.

According to McFarland, Mackenzie's record on board the *Somers* was -- with a crew of 106 -- 247 floggings<sup>34</sup> between June 3, 1842 to Dec. 10, 1842 – or six months and seven days; with floggings continued even after the *Somers* returned to port in December.<sup>35</sup> Even if the figures we draw from McKee were less than typical, the disparity is still quite alarming, as such as veteran Capt. Francis Gregory, who later inspected the returning second cruise crew, expressed.<sup>36</sup> Was Mackenzie's crew really so bad, or did Mackenzie suffer from lapses in his sanity? Could it be he was even and in some measure "possessed?" Following this line of interpretation, possibly he "imagined," if not reasonably discerned, what he felt was "a devil" or else something sinister amidst his crew, and was trying to extirpate, indeed exorcise, the ship of it by flogging. In suggesting such, it is not necessary to assume or infer that Mackenzie believed he was dealing with the literal "supernatural;" merely that that he thought that something *very* and inexplicably wrong was going on and wildly sought to extirpate it at what seemed to be the root.

Time and again at both the Court of Inquiry and the Court Martial it was asserted by officers and crew members that discipline and morale on board the *Somers* was good until leaving Madeira.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, captain of the foretop, Charles Van Velzor (or Velsor also Velzer) stated "I never saw better," (i.e., discipline) and until leaving Madeira. Midshipman/acting sailing master Matthew C. Perry Jr. was particular in noting that discipline was good leaving Madeira until they reached Porto Praya (now spelled Porto Praia), Cape Verde. Midshipman Henry Rodgers was among those who noticed a drop in crew conduct and enthusiasm after Madeira, but added he marked a serious change only after the brig departed Monrovia in Liberia.<sup>38</sup> Where and whatever the decisive turning point, what happened to bring about the radical transformation? This is one of the great mysteries of the *Somers* cruise for which again there is simply no ready and persuasive answer. However, if we posit our ghost magician being on board what *may* have happened is that somewhere in one of these ports of call he picked up *reinforcements* -- of his own

---

<sup>33</sup> "Autography [part II]," and where he analyzes Slidell's handwriting for signs of his personality, *Southern Literary Messenger*, Aug. 1836, pp. 601-604.

<sup>34</sup> Notwithstanding these were usually floggings with the colt and rarely the cat-o-nine tails on the *Somers*, some compensatory allowance can be made for the relatively young age of the majority of penalty recipients.

<sup>35</sup> Note the number includes floggings on both the *Somers*' preliminary and second cruises. MSD pp. 85-86, 179.

<sup>36</sup> And who also wrote he'd never seen the "crew of an American man-of-war so dirty and dejected in their personal appearances." Goldberg p. 277.

<sup>37</sup> CI p. 25, 31, 61; CM p. 59, 138; CMC pp. 290-291.

<sup>38</sup> CI p. 31.

criminal spirit person sort; to aid him in his scheme to disrupt the crew; diminutive sprites perhaps or maybe even a spirit person more proficient and experienced at mischief and mayhem than himself.

Spencer both before and during the cruise plainly manifested signs of someone under the influence. His desire to see whale's blood spilt as he told someone (again probably Midshipman Craney); his reputed mania for pirates (and for which we must rely on hearsay); his interest in slavers; getting himself tattooed while on the *Somers*; <sup>39</sup> palm readings and telling fortunes; <sup>40</sup> his sometimes penchant to physically strike and hit others whom he thought had offended him. Some or all of these characteristics might naturally be construed as indications of a somewhat depraved, sullied, or dubious moral character.

Yet was he plotting a mutiny? In my own opinion, at best he seems to maybe have, under the magician's sway, meditated and toyed with the idea; desired to provoke Mackenzie, but at no point had yet seriously resolved to carry it out. While frequent reference is made in the Inquiry and the Court Martial to his cursing and making derisive remarks about the captain, with Cromwell muttering and swearing similarly, and as well Spencer asking suspicious questions (e.g., to Marine Sgt. Garty concerning the feasibility of someone seizing the control of the brig), what is astonishing is that he did this within earshot of so many who ended up testifying against him, *including officers*. In other words, if Spencer and/or Cromwell genuinely contemplated mutiny why would they express themselves so openly and recklessly as they did? Was not the idea rather to bait the captain, or others, to suspect and/or act against him (Spencer); with that idea not being Spencer's conception, but rather our purported magician's? The same might also be inferred by Spencer's being set up, less so than setting himself up, as a rival to the captain and a competitor for the crew's loyalty and affection -- through and by means of Spencer's unusual friendliness toward them.

That Spencer himself did not *really* intend mutiny is seen in the conflicting versions as to what he planned on doing after he supposedly took the ship. One version is that he would have made the *Somers* a pirate ship, and take her to the Isle of Pines<sup>41</sup> off the southwest coast of Cuba. Another was that the *Somers* would become a slaver. But then didn't this mean going back to Africa? As Cooper notes, maritime piracy had all but faded out by that time; something a veteran seaman like Cromwell would have been well apprised of.<sup>42</sup> In addition, there was the repeated suggestion of making for the Northwest coast;<sup>43</sup> though as to what was supposedly to take place once there, there isn't the foggiest clue. And even if they did away with the captain and officers, *and* had it in them to do such a cold-blooded thing, how long could they reasonably expect their cruise to last before being captured by the U.S. Navy -- as if the Navy would otherwise write it all off merely as one ship lost?<sup>44</sup>

Lieut. Gansevoort at the Court of Inquiry stated:

"When [on 25 Nov.] I got abreast of the Jacob's ladder on the starboard side forward, I observed Mr. Spencer sitting on the ladder. I turned my eye towards him and immediately caught his eye, which he kept staring upon me for more than a minute, *with the most infernal expression I have ever seen upon a human face. It satisfied me at once of the man's guilt.* As soon as die hammocks were stowed, I reported the circumstances to the commander, and told him that I thought something should be done, in order to

<sup>39</sup> The emblem he had put on was evidently, according to Mackenzie, a "love device." Getting tattooed, however, was by no means unique to Spencer. Benjamin F. Green, who with India ink did the tattoos on board the *Somers*, etched a female pirate with American flag on McKinley; a freemason's coat of arms on Wales; an eagle on Garty, Godfrey, Gedney, Van Velzor, and Wetmore; and a ship on Warner, CM p. 219. Midshipman Deslondes also had a tattoo done on his arm for him, but of what isn't recorded. CM p. 176.

<sup>40</sup> In the Court Martial proceedings reference is made to fortune telling being practiced in New York City at the time. CM p. 181.

<sup>41</sup> It is worth noting that "Isle of the Pines" was also the title of one of the first fiction publications brought to America, c. 1668 and written by Henry Neville, perhaps even the very first such fiction publication (see *American Bibliography* by Charles Evans, vol. 1, p. 26.) Yet more intriguing, for purposes of our study, is the not very subtle sleaziness, indeed thoroughly rank pornography, of the book, and which, speaking personally, I would be inclined to think was itself a product of a witchcraft person, or at any rate something with which someone like the magician-ghost was acquainted with; if not having had some hand in influencing its writing.

<sup>42</sup> CMC p. 305, 329. See also Spencer's ideas of taking up pirating as he related them to Purser Heiskell, CI pp. 27-28; and which are dreamy and most fanciful to say the least.

<sup>43</sup> Cooper. "No man in his senses would talk of being a pirate on the northwest coast." CMC p. 302.

<sup>44</sup> According to Mackenzie, Spencer, when asked what he would have done had his mutiny prevailed, replied: "I do not know what would have become of me if I had succeeded." CI p. 12.

secure him. He replied that we would keep a sharp look out -- that he did not wish to do anything hastily: and that by evening quarters he would decide what it was best to do.<sup>45</sup>

What Gansevoort might have witnessed was Spencer in conference with the magician-ghost and while he (Spencer) had a “demon” in him. A demon, as I myself employ the term here, is a servant spirit of such as the magician; who can be got to enter into someone’s body for purposes of polluting and affecting the latter. As suggested earlier, Mackenzie in his being given to excess flogging may have had one sent into him. They are invariably (physically) dirty spirit persons that can vary in size from very tiny (a few inches) to a regular or ordinary sized person; and are typically suffering from all manner of emotional and psychological abnormality; which malady then is imparted in some greater or lesser degree to his recipient or receiver. Once more, if we go back to Edmund Spencer’s Archimago in the *Faerie Queene* that conjurer is described as sending out sprites to carry out criminal errands and schemes of his. So-called demons then can be commanded and employed similarly. A demon might not control his victim’s decisions and behavior, but he will certainly exert internal impact and pressure. One must not assume then that in all instances where a person has a demon in them that they have necessarily lost all control over themselves. It all depends on the intelligence, character and health of the individual being “possessed;” the force and power of the “demon,” and the duration of and the circumstances in which the bodily incursion occurs.

*List of key itinerary dates and some incidents of note in the Somers’ cruise:*<sup>46</sup>

- 13 Sept. 1842: Left New York
- 5 Oct.: Arrived at Funchal, Madeira
- 8 Oct.: Arrived at Santa Cruz de Teneriffe, Canary Islands
- 21 Oct.: Porta Praya, Cape Verde
- 10 Nov.: Cape Mesurado, Liberia
- [Fri., 25 Nov.: Spencer and Wales on the booms]
- [Sat., 26 Nov.: Spencer arrested in the evening]
- [Sun., Nov. 27: Church service, Mackenzie sermon/lecture to crew; felling of main top-gallant mast; “gathering” atop the main mast, Cromwell, et al; arrest of Cromwell and Small; the rush forward]
- [Mon., 28 Nov.: Waltham<sup>47</sup> and Lambert flogged; another Mackenzie sermon/lecture to crew; prisoners’ tobacco stopped; another Mackenzie sermon/lecture to crew]
- [Tues., 29 Nov.: Arrest of McKee, McKinley, Wilson, Green; Waltham again flogged; boom tackle carried away]
- [Wed, 30 Nov.: Council meets and witnesses statements taken]
- [Thurs., 1 Dec.: Council makes final decision; Mackenzie talks with Spencer while penning memorandum; farewells; executions]
- 4 Dec. (left on the 5<sup>th</sup>): St. Thomas, Virgin Islands
- 14 Dec.: New York [Debarked]

## 5. The “Mutiny.”

“In the evening I gave orders to Mr. Perry, my Clerk, to have all the officers come aft upon the quarter-deck. When they were brought up, I approached Spencer and addressed him thus: ‘I understand, sir, that you aspire to the command of the Somers.’ With a deferential air he replied: ‘Oh, no, sir!’ ‘Did you not,’ said I ‘tell Mr. Wales that you had a mutinous project on foot -- that you intended to kill the Commander and the officers of the Somers, and such of the crew as you could not seduce to your plans, and to enter upon a course of piracy?’ ‘I may have told him something like it,’ he replied, ‘but it was only in joke.’ ‘You admit, then, that you told, him of such a plan.’ ‘Yes, sir.’ ‘This, sir,’ I continued, ‘you must know is joking upon a forbidden subject...’”

<sup>45</sup> Mackenzie, likewise, remarks on Spencer’s “strange flashing of the eye” and “demonical expression,” see CI p. 9, CM p. 204. In the New York journal *Brother Jonathan*, of Dec. 31, 1842, it was also later and similarly reported; though we cannot be sure of the writer’s source – and perhaps he was merely embellishing Gansevoort’s and Mackenzie’s observations: “[Philip Spencer’s] manner sometimes occasioned remark, from his extraordinary fits of abstraction. When off duty he would sit motionless for hours together, looking vacantly on the sea of the deck, and at such times his eye and brow were naturally lowering and fierce, has an expression of concentrated determination very unusual in a person of his age. He had that singular power over the minds of his inferiors which is attributed to most master-spirits of evil...He was always remarked for the sinister expression of his eyes...”

<sup>46</sup> CM p. 63.

<sup>47</sup> It is no little passing strange, however you look at it, how Waltham, with apparently no instructions from anyone (or did he have instructions?), supposedly conceived the idea of stealing liquor to give to McKinley for purposes of stirring up the crew to action; with McKinley then turning him in. Note also, Lambert was flogged for having filched the ribbon from the hat of Gagely, the boy who fell off the top-gallant mast when it went down with the brace pull.

~ Alexander Slidell Mackenzie, Official Report to the Secretary of the Navy, Abel P. Upshur, Dec. 19, 1842.<sup>48</sup>

Thus far, we witness both crew and captain being pushed to the limit of their patience, morale, and self-discipline: with excess floggings (perhaps exciting murmuring and ill feeling); for most, no grog or spirits to ease things; bribery on some level(s) influencing the crew; reluctant obedience of orders -- yet never *overt* disobedience of the sort that implied or signaled violent rebellion. In spite of Mackenzie's and Gansevoort's peremptory assuming, what the evidence at most overwhelmingly seems to indicate is widespread disaffection rather than willful conspiracy; that is aside from Spencer's (and possibly also Cromwell's) baiting.

Things came to a head when on the night of November 25th, Spencer invited Purser's<sup>49</sup> Steward (i.e., assistant) James W. Wales to join him on the booms (bundles of spare spars stacked in the cutter or ship's boat) for a private conversation. In the course of their one and a half to two hour talk, Spencer attempted to enlist Wales in a plot in which he and an alleged 20 others of the crew would kill the captain and seize the ship. Such at least is what Wales reported, and there is no evidence to suggest he was lying. Even so, what else was discussed in that one in a half hour to two hour span was oddly left out in Wales testimony. Why hadn't Wales sounded out Spencer for more information? An hour and a half is a rather long time after all, and it is extraordinary that the question of what else was spoken was not further probed into at the Inquiry or the Court Martial; as it seems not implausible that it would have shed greater light on Spencer and Wales' state of mind at the time. As it was and when asked, Wales simply said he didn't remember – and that was that.<sup>50</sup> And it remains unexplained what on earth Spencer thought could possibly be Wales' motive for joining him on such a cold blooded and desperate outing. Nor further was it particularly queried if Wales noticed Spencer's being inebriated; though there was some raising of that possibility of Spencer's being so in the Court Martial questioning. If Spencer was only drunk what was it about his manner that apparently so alarmed and frightened Wales?<sup>51</sup>

No less odd is how Spencer is said to have decided to make Wales third in command when there had hitherto been no prior intimation whatsoever to the Purser's Steward of such a life endangering scheme; nor did Wales as far as we know ask who would be the second. Here is one instance where one would be inclined to think that either a) Wales had been in Spencer's confidence much earlier (in which case Wales' credibility becomes suspect); or b) the magician-ghost provided the idea to Spencer of Wales' trustworthiness, and Spencer believed him. Based on what facts we have and given our earlier premise, the latter seems a more plausible explanation. Likewise, Spencer's coded list,<sup>52</sup> containing whom he could or might rely on, may have been, at least in part, furnished by the magician; with perhaps "Andrews" or "Andreus" referring to the magician himself. If such was the case, it makes for a wonderful and amusing sort of joke or fooling someone at which this sort of ghost would relish, particularly given the actual and final result; for Spencer could never know what the magician told him was true or not unless he sounded the particular boys and men, *or* until he was caught by the captain – at which point it would be too late to blame the ghost for misleading him. And even if Spencer did realize he was being hoodwinked without being caught by the captain, the ghost might or could easily calm him and come up with an explanation to soothe his distrust and misapprehension.

Spencer normally shared his mid-watch with Midshipman Henry Rodgers, and part of the prospective mutiny plan he outlined to Wales included arrangements to throw Rodgers overboard at that time;<sup>53</sup> with the next scheduled watch to be occurring on Nov. 28; or two days from hence of their conversation. There was little time left therefore for preparation. Yet in spite of trusting Wales to the extent of promising him the position of third in command, Spencer did not deem it necessary to assign Wales a task in the carrying out of the plot. Reference was also made by Spencer to some unnamed confederate waiting to meet the mutineers at the Isle of the Pines (or else Cape San Antonio); which had it been true

<sup>48</sup> HSM pp. 33-34.

<sup>49</sup> The purser was, in effect, the ship's store keeper and who would sell incidental goods and supplies to the crew.

<sup>50</sup> CM pp. 50, 63

<sup>51</sup> CM pp. 66-67.

<sup>52</sup> When, around the time of its first discovery, the names were read off of those on Spencer's list, Midshipman Oliver H Perry is said to have declared, "those are his [Spencer's] chickens." CM p. 176.

<sup>53</sup> CI p. 20.

would seem to have contradicted Spencer's promise that Wales would remain third in command. The alleged confederate awaiting them may have been something the magician informed Spencer of; indeed, the supposed confederate may have been a reference to the magician himself.

While one would assume the coded list required the utmost secrecy, it is curious but true nonetheless that before his arrest Spencer, on separate occasions, carelessly hinted to Midshipmen Tillotson and Rodgers about it; even asked the latter if he knew Greek (which he did), and was emphatic in telling them that it was something that no one was to see on any account.<sup>54</sup>

Subsequent to the mysterious chat on the booms and upon his evading Spencer's, Small's, and (as he claimed) Cromwell's vigilance, Wales conveyed what Spencer had uttered to Purser H. M. Heiskell. Heiskell then by way of Lieut. Gansevoort had it disclosed to the captain. Mackenzie's initial response to what was reported as going on was smart and appropriate, both in his initial skepticism and the wording he used to later accost Spencer. Had he resorted more to ridicule, as he did at the very first, instead of outrage, as he came to do, Mackenzie might easily have defused the entire situation. Moreover, as Cooper wisely observes, Mackenzie showed regrettable judgment and aforeshadowed in arresting Spencer on deck, and in front of the crew. He might instead, and employing humor and parental kindness toward a wayward youth; have charged Spencer in the quiet of his cabin, and, as well, confined him there – rather than, as happened, giving fuel to fire the crew's ire and resentment (a number spoke later that they did not like the idea of Spencer and the others being put in irons.)<sup>55</sup> Possibly Mackenzie knew and was aware of the magician by this time, and feared that if he did not act in a hurry the latter would warn Spencer, and the latter would be forced to action.

In any event and despite Spencer's arrest, Mackenzie thereafter seems to have only become more distraught, and as others have expressed it, was indeed seized by panic; even though some of the crew at first inferred Spencer had been ironed because of a scuffle he had got into with Midshipman Thompson. When Cromwell, Green, and McKinley were also arrested it was felt necessary to point cocked pistols at them. The impression of this is one of absurd behavior; at the time unwarranted, and that does not seem could have served any useful purpose. To have the loaded pistols on hand at the time of arrest would, naturally, have been a sensible precaution. But leveling them at the heads of the accused when there was no display whatsoever of resistance?

Again, and aside from Spencer's, there was at this juncture no clear and present indications of actual mutiny; discontent, dilatoriness in obeying orders,<sup>56</sup> and occasional open murmuring perhaps, yes, but mutiny no. The suspicious actions of Small pulling on the brace<sup>57</sup> and the subsequent toppling of the main royal top gallant mast (Nov. 27<sup>th</sup>); and seaman Wilson's hiding a weapon might be deemed signs of such. Yet if these occurred with a design to assist prospective mutiny, they evince a certain childish folly on Small and Wilson's part. And again, as with the names on Spencer's coded list, we might see in these events the magician commanding the two seamen in these actions; while simultaneously and in turn giving the captain and officers further inducement for alarm. The running aft of the crew at Midshipman M.C. Perry's beckoning for hands, interpreted by some of the officers as a lunging attempt to free the prisoners, as well takes on a comical aspect when seen in retrospect.

Yet possibly and in addition to these occurrences, mysterious and ominous happenings, not later reported, were transpiring to send shivers up and down Mackenzie and the officer's spines. Surely if there was a magician ghost, and his own spirit person assistances, on board, it was a splendid opportunity to stir up trouble and, in the process, have some fun at the unprepared captain's expense.<sup>58</sup> Frequent mention is

<sup>54</sup> CI pp. 34, 40, CM p. 167.

<sup>55</sup> CM pp. 270-280.

<sup>56</sup> Seaman Charles Van Velzor, one of those placed into custody by Mackenzie after the *Somers* landed in New York, stated at the Court of Inquiry he never saw anyone refuse an order, CI p. 39.

<sup>57</sup> A brace is a rope used to change the angle of the yards and their sails. For Cooper's close explanation and analysis of the event concerning the brace on board the *Somers*, see CMC pp. 281-285, 314-315, and 340-342.

<sup>58</sup> This curious exchange occurred during the Court of Inquiry. Mackenzie asks Oliver H. Perry: "Q. Did you hear Mr. Spencer, shortly before his arrest, ask whether he had been talking in his sleep, and say he had been dreaming, and would not have been heard to talk about what he had been dreaming for a great deal? A. No, sir." CI p. 34.

made in the Inquiry and Court Martial testimony to the peril *night* posed. But as Cooper remarked, could not the vessel have been studded with lanterns?<sup>59</sup> For that matter, a bright moonlit night, a pitched black night, or a sudden squall where equally seen by Mackenzie as affording a dangerous opportunities to rescue the prisoners.

If there was a mutiny plot, who and how many among the crew even knew of it? At no time during or after the cruise was or did any of the crew, aside from Wales, bring forth testimony of a mutiny having been directly stated or communicated; even when, after reaching New York, they were privately offered amnesty and immunity from prosecution if they provided the same. Spencer's assertion to Wales that there were already 20 conspirators may have been a merely wishful guess, fib, or, alternatively, false or exaggerated misinformation passed on to him by the magician. Yet if the number were true, who were they? The most we have to go upon in trying to answer this is Spencer's list, which included Wales, and Mackenzie's later arrests both on ship and after entering New York. Regarding the latter, and of course not counting those executed, none subsequently had charges brought against them despite the indisputable gravity of the offence; including not even McKinley who Mackenzie surmised was as the one who would eventually commandeer the vessel and do away with Cromwell, after the latter did in Spencer!<sup>60</sup> Either, as has been averred, this was done out of charity to the accused, a desire to quell further drawn out and potentially embarrassing litigation, and or else it was decided there was insufficient evidence to convict anyone. At the Court of Inquiry, crew members when asked what they knew about who was in on the mutiny -- and aside from references to the idle conversations of such as Daniel McKinley when the latter said he might like to become a slaver -- generally expressed or implied ignorance of anyone being so involved other than Spencer, Small, and Cromwell – and, in most instances, only knew concretely of these three after they had been arrested, and this from statements by Mackenzie and Gansevoort.

Evidently lack of faith was so bad between the officers and crew that no mention was ever made of even a single informer (and there were informers<sup>61</sup>) placed amidst the crew to alert the officers if they saw symptoms of anything afoot. And this last could well have been done merely by their sounding or displaying a prearranged sign or signal to the captain; without it being necessary to give themselves away. And yet at least eleven crewmen and the ship's carpenter (and not counting other warrant officers) acted as informers at the council arraigned by Mackenzie on Nov. 30<sup>th</sup>. Notwithstanding, Mackenzie at the Court of Inquiry, in effect, attested that absolutely *none* of the crew could be trusted, stating:

“Let us suppose the whole crew had been examined, an all had protested their innocence and ignorance. Could we have believed and trusted them? Would the uncertainty have been removed or diminished? On the contrary, must not the universal denial have increased and justified our suspicion of universal guilt? We must still have believed that many were guilty, and could not have known that any were innocent.”<sup>62</sup>

That neither Spencer, Small, or Cromwell, insofar as we know, was not interrogated at great length as to their plans and intentions seems more than curious. True, it could be expected that if they had been in earnest that they would not divulge incriminating information. But one would think some clever

---

<sup>59</sup> CMC p. 277. With respect to Cooper's own views on the preternatural, there are two quotes we might offhand and in passing cite. The first comes from *James Fenimore Cooper: A Biographical and Critical Study* (1949) by James Grossman, p. 246, where the author states: “His social position was naturally more ambiguous in Cooperstown than in New York. Cooper took some part in the community life of his village. He gave a Gothic oak screen to Christ Church, addressed the local group that was raising money for the relief of Ireland during the famine of 1847; debated the slavery question...; lectured on naval battles and also on hypnotism. (His early interest in ‘magnetic trances’ was connected with the occult, and some time after attending a seance of the Fox sisters, around 1830 in New York, he came to believe in spiritualism.)” While Cooper himself in his very last novel, *Ways of the Hour* (1850), ch. 29, makes the remark: “We pretend not to a knowledge of the arcana of nature, to be able to detect the manner in which the moving principles prompt to good or evil, but we must reject all sacred history, and no small portion of profane, not to believe that agencies exist that are not visible to our ordinary senses; and that our boasted reason, when abandoned to its own support, becomes the victim of those that are malign. We care not by what names these agents are called, imps, demons, evil spirit or evil passions; but this we do know, let him beware who submits to their control. Better, far better, were it that such an one had never been born!”

<sup>60</sup> Mackenzie: “McKinley...he is, in fact, the individual who, if the mutiny had been successful, would have made way with all his competitors and risen to the command.” CM p. 201.

<sup>61</sup> CI p. 11.

<sup>62</sup> CI p. 47.

questioning might succeed in uncovering their motives and states of mind, and hence the extent of their actual guilt and premeditation; while checking for agreements and discrepancies in what they knew.

But Mackenzie was and had been losing control of the ship, so *someone* was to blame; though most strange this should only and suddenly occur to him after Wales' report. Certainly he had in custody the most likely suspects, and that seemed enough to resolve the matter. Yet still there was much he and the officers were still in the dark about. On different occasions at the Court of Inquiry Mackenzie speaks of Spencer, then at another Cromwell, as *the ringleader*.<sup>63</sup> Naturally, it could not have been both, and Spencer in that role simply didn't seem very believable to anyone. The true ringleader then must be Cromwell. "The petty officers said he [Cromwell] was the one man from whom real apprehension was entertained..."<sup>64</sup>

To the degree Cromwell was later maligned almost suggests that his many accusers may have been inspired or sped on by demons; since he is made to come across as the most foul, mean, and wretched sort of person. Perhaps there was truth in what they testified about him. On the other hand, those who knew him personally, including officers who served over him, afterward attested to his good character.<sup>65</sup> In early part of cruise, Gansevoort himself had spoken of Cromwell as an invaluable sailor for whom he'd seek promotion.<sup>66</sup> But how much or whichever was the case, Mackenzie needed a ringleader and assigning Spencer that part was little short of laughable. Granted, Spencer was the most qualified to corrupt the crew, but not the most likely candidate to actually lead it. He was, in fact, not much passed being a boy himself, and when it came to sailing the ship there was no way the mutineers could look to him when Cromwell, a veteran able seaman, was standing by. And hadn't Small himself surmised, qualifying with "That's a hard thing for me to say, Sir," that Cromwell was in on the plot? Yes, but then Cromwell had earlier implicated Small.<sup>67</sup>

Everyone, including the ships cooks and stewards, seemed to have frequently seen Spencer and Cromwell, out in the open, conferring with each other; and this was taken by some as evidence of the latter's guilt. So much for secrecy. Cooper persuasively demonstrates that the paper Spencer is reported to have shown Cromwell was not his quasi-Greek list, and adduces several reasons for this. For one, if what Cromwell saw was the coded list, it would have to be assumed that Cromwell could read and translate it. Granted it is not impossible that Cromwell could have had it translated for him, out of sight of others, by Spencer before hand. But if one examines the thing in its original and confusing form and given other distracting circumstances, the likelihood of this seems slight.

In 1911, Marian Gouverneur, wife of Samuel L. Gouverneur, Jr., the first U.S. Consul to Fuzhou, China, and who was in her twenties at the time of the *Somers* affair, published a book of her life reminiscences and recorded therein:

"The proceedings of the Mackenzie trial were eagerly read by an interested public. As I remember the testimony given regarding Spencer's last moments upon earth, Mackenzie announced to the youthful culprit that he had but ten minutes to live. He fell at once upon his knees and exclaimed that he was not fit to die, and the Captain replied that he was aware of the fact, but could not help it. It is recorded that he read his Bible and Prayer-Book, and that the Captain referred him to the 'penitent thief,' but when he pleaded that his fate would kill his mother and injure his father, Mackenzie made the inconsiderate reply that the best and only service he could render his father was to die."

"I recall a conversation bearing upon the Somers tragedy which I overheard between my father and his early friend, Thomas Morris, when their indignation was boundless. The latter's son, Lieutenant Charles W. Morris, U.S.N., had made several cruises with the alleged mutineer Cromwell. Meeting Mackenzie he stated this fact, saying at the same time that he found him a well-disposed and capable

---

<sup>63</sup> HSM pp. 51, 68.

<sup>64</sup> CI p. 12.

<sup>65</sup> MSD p. 175.

<sup>66</sup> CM p. 78.

<sup>67</sup> CI p. 10, MSD p. 135.

seaman. Mackenzie quickly responded that ‘he had a bad eye,’ and then Lieutenant Morris recalled that the unfortunate man had a cast in one eye.”<sup>68</sup>

Although Cromwell to the end protested his innocence, Elisha Small, when arrested, made no objection to being confined; did not at that time deny a plot. Even so and regarding Small, Mackenzie, in his original narrative and at the Court Martial Proceedings, had to concede: “I have since been led to believe that the business upon which he had entered was repugnant to his nature, though the love of money and of rum had been too strong for his fidelity.”<sup>69</sup> In attempting to ascertain who the would be plotters were, and despite his reported admission of somehow being one of them, it is peculiar the degree to which Small then and since is largely lost in the shuffle of what was going on; so much focus understandably and otherwise being directed at Mackenzie, Spencer, and Cromwell. What after all, was the case against *him*? He said Spencer had spoken to him of a plot, or at least did not deny that Spencer had (CI p. 21). When asked by Gansevoort for a plain answer as to whether or not Cromwell was involved, the best Small could furnish him with was a guess (CI p. 23). At other times he had denied a mutiny and simply, and quite believably, thought Spencer was loony and, in effect, playing around (CM pp. 115, 169.) Although deemed as being fit to die for mutiny, by reporting himself sick to surgeon Leacock just prior to his arrest, Small obviously evinced little stomach for any actual uprising. At his execution, he related that he had said he was prepared to kill someone; probably in answer to a question Spencer posed to him; similar to one such as was put to Wales. And yet did not this seemingly criminal assertion originally transpire as part of the same “foolish conversation” he reportedly had with the latter (CM p. 169)? Taken all together, the ridiculous picture of Small as a serious conspirator seems to blow the case wide open that there was no real plot of mutiny to begin with; at least if we don’t count Spencer’s (and Cromwell’s?) baiting Mackenzie as such. And, for that matter, perhaps it was only such baiting that Spencer was admitting to when, as reported, he resigned himself to his death and said it was just.

Why, moreover, couldn’t Mackenzie or any of the officers get *any* credible or useful information from Small about a plot, and when Small was else so non-resistant and accommodating? We noted earlier that Small’s pulling on the brace and toppling the top-gallant mast, if intentional, may have been commanded him by the magician. If that was the case, it would certainly help explain an impromptu motive and the timing of the deed. When, after being shackled, he told he would be executed, it is said he smiled as if he didn’t think that could or would actually happen. Again, might this have been an instance of the magician falsely reassuring him? And or did he smile because he didn’t think the plot hadn’t been serious, and it and his arrest, were after all only really intended as a joke?

Based on what we later come to learn, including the letter found in his Bible from his poor widowed mother and Mackenzie and his officers’ own professed liking and sympathy for him, Small strikes one as relatively naïve and innocent, if at times volatile, as any on board the *Somers*, and, for which reason and in retrospect, could be said to have become the true and fitting lamb for (someone’s) slaughter, and in turn and also, without question, the clear inspirational model for Melville’s *Billy Budd*.<sup>70</sup>

At the very least, Cromwell jested with Spencer about being his partner as pirate and or slaver. But idle and comical conversations of daring-do and other nonsense were not relegated to these. The following are taken from the Court of Inquiry Proceedings:

\* “William Clark, 1st class apprentice: One day Cromwell...was finding fault [with the boys] when Mr. Spencer said -- ‘Yes, the sooner we get shut of these little devils the better, for they eat bread and are of no use.’ This was on the passage to St. Thomas...”

<sup>68</sup> *As I Remember: Recollections of American Society during the Nineteenth Century* (1911), pp. 91-93.

<sup>69</sup> CI p. 9, CM p. 198.

<sup>70</sup> Though another side of him is revealed in reports at the Court of Inquiry where it was said that as well as having been previously on a slaver, Small had boasted of his killing a Negro. CI p. 38. And there is this from Charles Sibley’s testimony:

“Q: Did you ever have any difficulty with Small?

A. Never any particular difficulty; he would be good sometimes, and would some times get in a passion.

Q. Do you remember any incident with him about a knife?

A. Yes, sir; before we sailed, he had a sheath knife, and one night he had a piece of raw pork on his biscuit, eating it; I was sky-larking [teasing, playing around] around him; he was kneeling down; he flew into a rage, and said, ‘I would as soon run that knife into you, as run it into the pork.’” CM p. 171.

\* "James Mitchell, 2nd class apprentice: One day after the execution I was sitting on the main-top with Sullivan, and I asked him if he thought they could take the vessel. He said he thought they could, and then I asked him what they would do if they had taken it, and he said they would kill all the hands and sink the vessel...He said, 'Dead men tell no tales, kill all and sink the vessel.'"

\* "Samuel Van Norden age 15, 3d class app:

A. They were on the forecastle in the dog watch; Mr. Spencer asked Cromwell how he could disguise the brig; he said, 'by shipping the bowsprit aft,' that is all; there was an officer coming forward at the time, I do not recollect who it was; he (Cromwell) seemed as if he tried to turn it off.

...

Q. If the bowsprit of the Somers had been put aft, would she have been disguised so that you would not have known her?

A. No, sir; I don't think I should, or anybody else.

Q. If one of the seamen had told you he could have disguised the Somers by putting the bowsprit aft, so that she could come into New York and not be known, would you not have supposed he was laughing at you?<sup>71</sup>

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Did you tell this conversation between Cromwell and Mr. Spencer before your arrival?

A. No, sir; I don't think I did.

Q. Did you hear Cromwell declare himself innocent when about to die?

A. No, sir.

Q. Was there not a great deal of talk aboard ship, after the arrest and before your arrival, as to Cromwell's guilt or innocence?

A. Yes, sir; there was some talk about it.

Q. Hearing this talk, how is it you did not tell of this conversation between Cromwell and Mr. Spencer?

A. I was not asked."

\* "Jonas E. S. Humbert, age 16, 3d class apprentice:

Q. [Mackenzie] Have you ever seen Mr. Spencer in conversation with Cromwell? If so, state what passed.

A. One time Mr. Spencer and Cromwell were sitting on the forehatch; Mr. Spencer asked Cromwell what kind of a piratical vessel he thought the brig would make; Cromwell said he thought she would make a very good one -- she was a fast sailer -- but if he had anything to do with her he would throw the launch overboard: I saw them talking another time; they were sitting on the forecastle chest; Mr. Ro[d]gers was officer of the deck at the time: Mr. Ro[d]gers gave the order to haul in the braces and square the afteryards; neither Mr. Spencer nor Cromwell seemed to take any notice of it: it was their watch; Mr. Ro[d]gers came forward and gave the order again; they then got up and had the yards squared; when they were done, they went and sat on the chest again; then Cromwell said to Mr. Spencer, 'I wish the yards, braces, and all, were in hell,' Mr. Spencer told him not to say that, that they would have some fun with the brig yet; then Mr. Spencer asked Cromwell for a chew of tobacco, and then went off.

---

<sup>71</sup> It was understood, however, that Spencer had originally posed his question in earnest. CM p. 96.

Q. Have you ever heard Mr. Spencer speak disrespectfully of the commander?

A. Yes, sir; he said, ‘God damn him,’ that he was ‘nothing but a damned old humbug.’

Q. Did you ever hear any conversation between Mr. Spencer and M’Kee? if so, state what passed.

A. M’Kee was sitting on the forecastle; Mr. Spencer came up to him and asked him if he could cut out clothes and sew them, M’Kee said he could; Mr. Spencer asked him how he would like to go to sea with him; M’Kee said he would like it very well; Mr. Spencer told him he would not have to cut any winter clothes, because he was going to a warm place; then M’Kee asked him for a chew of tobacco, and he gave him a piece as large as my hand.”

\* “Peter Tyson was then called, and being duly sworn by the president of the court, testified as follows :—

Q. What is your name? your age ? your rank? were you on board of the Somers during her last cruise?

A. My name Peter Tyson, my age nineteen.

A. I have seen him frequently talking with Small and Cromwell.

Q. Did you ever overhear any of their conversation?

...A. Immediately after quarters on the night of Mr. Spencer’s arrest, me and Sears went forward, and Cromwell and Small were in conversation together; Sears asked Small what Mr. Spencer was confined for; Cromwell replied for a supposed mutiny; Sears asked him the meaning of mutiny; he said it was a plan to kill the captain and officers and take the vessel; Small said he (Small) thought like the commander did, that Mr. Spencer was half crazy and childish; they parted then, and we went away: I forgot to mention that I asked M’Kinley if he would like to go in a slaver, and he then made the reply that they got \$35 a month and prize-money, and that he would go in one if he got a chance at St. Thomas, and they were regular pirates in a measure...

Q. [Mackenzie] What is your name? your age? your rank? were you on board of the Somers during her last cruise?

A. My name Joseph Sears, my age nearly nineteen; I was on board of the Somers as second-class boy in her last cruise.

Q. Did you notice anything particular in the conduct of Cromwell and Small immediately after the arrest of Mr. Spencer?

A. Yes, sir; after Mr. Spencer was arrested and the retreat beaten, I went forward; Cromwell was leaning against the bitts, Small standing beside him; they were talking together, not to the boys, and one or two boys standing around; I asked Small what Mr. Spencer was arrested for; I think it was Cromwell who answered me, I am not positive: he said it was for a supposed mutiny; I asked Small what ‘supposed mutiny’ was; he said it was to murder one person or more; Small said that he supposed as the captain did, that there was to be no mutiny, that the young man was half crazy, half out of his head; Cromwell was leaning against the bitts, his hat over his eyes, apparently very mad, biting his lips and rolling his eyes about; he would look out from under his hat to see anybody, as if he did not want to let any one see his face...”<sup>72</sup>

It might be reasonably inferred that our posited magician, for purposes of undermining the captain’s authority and dignity, found occasions to make Mackenzie look ridiculous. We see good instances of this in Cromwell’s pointed and outspoken barbs; as when he damned the hardly (until much later in the cruise) functioning lacing used for the jib, the latter of Mackenzie’s invention. Likewise, when a chance

---

<sup>72</sup> HSM pp. 108, 130, 132-133, 135-136.

vessel sailed into view, Mackenzie apparently wanted to exercise the crew by *pretending* that the ship appearing was a threat, and for this purpose had his men and boys beat to quarters; while in the process making quite a din and stir about it. This then became perfect opportunity for Cromwell to claim he'd never seen so much noise and humbugging – and thus make Mackenzie look silly and laughable in the eyes of an ostensibly *real* pro.

## 6. Verdict and Sentence.

"After the witnesses had all been examined, 'I,' said Lieutenant [Guert] Gansevoort to Midshipman [Hunn] Gansevoort [cousin of the lieutenant], 'went on deck and informed Captain Mackenzie that the testimony was not as strong as had been represented to him, and that I thought from the indications the court did not attach much importance to it. Captain Mackenzie replied that the witnesses had not been thoroughly examined, and directed me to recall them, and put certain interrogations to them, a copy of which he handed to me. I returned and complied with this request, but elicited nothing more specific than the first examination had brought out. Some general conversation after the conclusion of the testimony satisfied me that the court was not prepared to convict the accused. I again repaired to the deck, and expressed my opinion to Captain Mackenzie, who replied that it was evident these young men had wholly misapprehended the nature of the evidence, if they had not also misapprehended the aggravated character of the offense, and that there would be no security for the lives of officers or protection to commerce if an example was not made in a case so flagrant as this. It was my duty, he urged, to impress these views upon the court. I returned and did, by impressing these considerations, obtain a reluctant conviction of the accused.' Passed Midshipman Gansevoort, who gave me this startling narrative, sailed the next day in a United States brig, which, with all on board, was engulfed at sea."

~ Thurlow Weed, *The Autobiography of Thurlow Weed* (1883), p. 516.

In that period of six days from Nov. 26 to Dec. 1, viz., Wales' report to Heiskell till the day of the executions, there was no recorded act of blatant disobedience; unless we include instances where a few boys (McKinley, McKee, and Green) came on late for watch, and this not very likely as Cooper argues. In fact, Peter Tyson noted that after the arrests of Spencer, Small, and Cromwell, there was, as one would imagine there would have been, some *improvement* in ship's discipline -- and yet not enough somehow to have removed the threat of mutiny. Yet as long as Cromwell, Small, and Spencer were in custody, the supposed remaining mutineers could not possibly navigate and sail the brig.<sup>73</sup> All therefore that was needed to end any such attempt was to instantly shoot the three prisoners, and who were watched with armed guards around the clock. To add to their troubles, the mutineers had no one left to lead them otherwise, and even if they had, they risked deadly quarrels among both themselves and that part of the crew that was not mutinous.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the Court of Inquiry proceedings, 19 year old Peter Tyson gave the following statement of what was taking place among the ordinary crew. Tyson's version of what was going deserves quoting in its entirety because it furnishes what seems a reasonably accurate depiction of the state of much of the crew's mind about this juncture in the cruise; i.e., just before and about the time of the first arrests. Although seen by some as strong evidence incriminating Spencer, others may be inclined to take an opposite view; namely, it reveals that, if anything, the supposedly mutinous and blood thirsty crew, though foolish, were largely, if not necessarily entirely, innocuous; and further that so much of the threat, unless perhaps we except Wilson, was in reality only so much puerile banter and gossiping.

"Peter Tyson sworn. -- I am in my 19th year. I was third class apprentice the Somers and this was my first voyage. The first I heard of the mutiny was a conversation the night before Mr. Spencer was put in irons. I was laying all on the spar deck, between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> guns to the leeward side, about 7 o'clock. In the evening, and Wilson and McKinley came aft. Wilson had his battle axe in his hand and a sharpening stone and no hat on. McKinley said to Wilson he had just told me that we have spies and we had better be careful. Wilson replied no, he need not fear that; he knows me and knows what I am, and that I have been in too many scrapes. McKinley then said to Wilson, 'Would you join them?' He answered, 'He would not mind it.' McKinley then said, I don't know, I think I would rather go on a regular slaving expedition, for there they had \$25 a month and prize money, and when we got to St. Thomas we would be fitted out. It was against the orders to lie on the leeward side of the vessel and they had come up to me and saw who I was before they began this conversation. Had a pea jacket on. I was drowsy, and I think they thought I was asleep. I had gone there to try to sleep, and I laid still till this; and I then asked McKinley what was that he

<sup>73</sup> Although it seems to have been allowed that Spencer probably was able to navigate, Oliver Browning, chief boatswain's mate, made it quite plain that he did not believe Spencer understood the working of the ropes and canvas, and hence could not sail the ship. CI p. 36.

was saying about a slaver? He replied that he was talking about a slaver that left St. Thomas, and had been gone about 3 months, and had taken three or four vessels. He said she was fitted out with about as many guns as the Somers. I said I had heard of a slaver being fitted out there; and he said it was a free port, and they were often fitted out there. There was nothing said about pirates, only McKinley said, "he would rather go in a regular slaver." I never noticed that there was any slackness about duty till after we left Teneriffe; and after that Wilson, who was Captain of the after guard, has often said to me, 'D—n them, they have got plenty of men forward, let them do it themselves.' The discipline grew a little better after the arrest, but much better after the execution. Sullivan and McKee were particularly slack. I have frequently heard Cromwell d—n parts of the ship; something about the stays, I recollect, and the one that invented it This had been made by the Commander's orders, and Cromwell had been told so. Have had no conversations with Spencer, Cromwell and Small, but have known them to be very intimate together. I was afraid they would attempt to take the vessel after Spencer, Cromwell and Small were arrested. I recollect Wilson's saying he would take the boy Weaver's life, and would pay the Master, Mr. Perry, and the Commander, for having him flogged. Weaver had done something, for which Wilson struck him in the face, when Weaver reported him to the officer of the deck. Master Perry, and the Commander ordered Wilson to be flogged for it. In the conversation between Wilson and McKinley, Wilson said, 'He knows well enough that I did not come on board this vessel willingly.' He also said that when they got to St. Thomas he would run away and join a slaver. I do not believe that if the execution had not taken place, the vessel could have been brought safe to any port. Witness was examined before the Council of Officers, and every thing he there stated was true."<sup>74</sup>

That *something* was afoot we can all readily agree. But did such originate solely with Spencer, and or with someone else?

These then, and night, were the opponents Mackenzie faced.

Given the information we have, and even assuming the presence of a conniving and malevolent ghost(s) on board, it is not possible to know or understand with certainty what brought Mackenzie and his officers to such a panic – *if panic it was*. It furthermore comes as no surprise that in the Inquiry and Court Martial, *no one* reported actual knowledge of there having been any plans of a rescue attempt of the prisoners; moreover, several among the crew later declared their ignorance of their having got wind of any such thing. Certainly, there were others who *believed* there would or might be a rescue attempt. But, as Cooper reminds us, this was only so much speculating and guessing, and remember even if there was real intention of a rescue there was no one apparently left to lead it and would further assume some were prepared to risks both their own lives and that of the prisoners in the process (i.e., the latter being the only "mutineers" who could even sail and navigate the ship to begin with.) And there were also some in the crew who testified that they *did not* believe there would be a rescue attempt. Even as Mackenzie expressed it, there was "reason to fear" an attempt, and yet this without any clear and solid proof of such as would justify hangings. Why therefore did not Mackenzie conclude, along with Commodore Shubrick and Cooper, that "a mutiny detected is a mutiny suppressed?"<sup>75</sup> Further and in light of the later almost universal dismissal of Philip Spencer as a rascal, what real grounds could there have been that Mackenzie in bringing Philip to trial for the grave charge of mutiny would be summarily vexed and embarrassed by Philip's influential father? Even if as time went on, public sympathy on behalf of the executed tended to grow, by the end of the nineteenth century the majority consensus still tended to side with Mackenzie.

"Q. [Mackenzie] Was there or not, in the mutinous manner of the crew by looks or manner otherwise, an appearance such as could not be described?

A. [Midshipman Thompson] There was."<sup>76</sup>

In his decision to have the three most prominent hanged -- and it would appear in retrospect that it really was *his*, and possibly Gansevoort's, decision, and not that of the council he convened to try the three offenders -- was Mackenzie merely using the occasion to both shock the crew into submission and, at the

<sup>74</sup> CI p. 38.

<sup>75</sup> CMC p. 287.

<sup>76</sup> CI p. 32. See also Mackenzie's questioning of Midshipman Hays, CI p. 33.

same time, make an example, and blow off some steam of resentment at the disrespect shown him and his command? If so, and this, frankly, seems the more believable explanation, then Mackenzie and his officers essentially lied when they later claimed that they thought the imminent peril of the ship's being taken by a rescue attempt mandated the hangings. When Richard Henry Dana, Jr., and Charles Sumner came to write their eloquent defenses of Mackenzie they both made good sense as long as one assumed the threat of mutiny was real and reasonably suspected. Yet that of course was exactly the question – was the threat real and were the grounds of suspicion reasonable? As Cooper rightly observes, if there were events and circumstances to have excused Mackenzie's ultimate action and remedy, nothing of the sort comes out in his and his partisans' account of what happened. And in Dana and Sumner's defenses one gets the sense that the hangings were, at bottom, warranted as a measure against otherwise rising anarchism, rampant alcoholism among sailors and the lower classes, irreligion, levelers, Jacobins, and what later came to be known as Bolshevism. Mackenzie, in effect, saved not only the *Somers*, but had struck a blow at insidious forces making themselves generally felt in society, not least of which among young people; many of whom were sorely in need of forceful discipline and a cautionary reminder. If this interpretation is true, then it arguably sustains our contention that Mackenzie, consciously or no, felt himself combating an amorphous, and yet highly toxic and lethal, ghost.<sup>77</sup> To help us understand his frame of mind at the time, Mackenzie, in his original narrative presented to the Court of Inquiry, himself explained: "Some mysterious agency had evidently been at work since the departure of the *Somers* from New York..."<sup>78</sup>

But the officers were fatigued and famished guarding the prisoners. Again Cooper, why not have let them sit and, as evidently was the case, have food brought up to them? These are after all military men being asked to wait it out some five days;<sup>79</sup> in order to see that justice and due process, regarding a life or death matter, could be properly effected.

On Nov. 28, as recorded in the log book, a strange sail was sighted to the south and westward.<sup>80</sup> Why not have availed himself of the opportunity to both sound the *Somers'* crew and confer with the other ship's captain, and say, as a last but necessary resort, place the three offenders on board? Surely, this could have been done under innocent pretexts without seeming to suggest hauling down of the colors of the Navy's honor. And yet it was as early as on that date (and two days prior to Mackenzie's appointing a council to try them) that the deaths of Spencer, Small, and Cromwell were being contemplated by Mackenzie and his officers; even though the day before it had initially been decided to take the three back to the states for trial instead.

Likewise was it the case when it came to the alternative of making speedily for port (and debarking the three into custody there.) In its report of the story on Sat., April 29, 1843, *The Illustrated London News* (No. 52, vol. II, pp. 292-293) put forward that instead of hanging the three men,<sup>81</sup> the *Somers*, going 8 knots with a steady southeasterly wind, could have made for and reached Guadeloupe or Antigua by the following day; and rather than have to wait till they attained St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands. Some of the crew later stated that they believed ship could have made it to St. Thomas without undue risk.<sup>82</sup> All of the officers and most of the crew at the inquiry and Court Martial, on the other hand, maintained that the *Somers* could *not* have arrived at any port safely without having first hanged the accused mutiny ringleaders. This was hedged, however, by statements avowing that it would have been dishonorable and unseemly for a United States Navy ship to seek aid in such a matter from a foreign port or power. And yet it wasn't dishonorable or unseemly to throw away law and minimal due process, in a life or death matter, to the winds in order merely to be and for purposes of putting on a show and teaching a lesson to the recalcitrant juvenile crew *in peacetime*? It was for reasons of this sort that some naval officers, such

---

<sup>77</sup> Thurlow Weed's suggestion that Mackenzie may have hung young Spencer as a means of pursuing *personal* political ambition strikes one as unjust and absurd.

<sup>78</sup> CI p. 10. Note he says "since the departure...from New York;" and in none of his testimonies or accounts does Mackenzie, unlike most all the other witnesses, make pointed reference to a falling off of discipline after Madeira. For him, evidently, there was seriously problem more or less from the start.

<sup>79</sup> CMC p. 292.

<sup>80</sup> CM p. 49.

<sup>81</sup> At 17 deg. 34 min. 28 sec. north and 57 deg. 57 min. 45 sec. west; i.e. or more simply, 17.5 north latitude and 58 degrees west longitude. CI p. 43.

<sup>82</sup> HSM p. 100.

as Commodore Stockton, (at least in speaking about the question) would have voted to have Mackenzie himself hanged.

## 7. Concluding Remarks.

[Mackenzie to Spencer:] “Your design was to...You must have been aware that you could compass it only by passing over my dead body...You had laid out for yourself, sir, a great deal to do.”<sup>83</sup>

By all accounts, Philip Spencer, in his worser aspect, behaved more like an eccentric youth and a free-wheeling juvenile delinquent than a murderer. Why then didn’t Mackenzie sense this and spare his life? One explanation might be that because the ghost prompted Spencer in his little mischiefs and “mania” for mutiny, and owing to the ghost himself being a murderer, and in fact of the very worst and most ruthless sort, Mackenzie mistook Spencer for the ghost whose presence and effects he felt, and, not being aware of the ghost, understandably could not distinguish the two. According to this view, Mackenzie did not have Spencer executed for purposes of some ulterior, selfish or jingoistic motive, but because he genuinely thought, albeit mistakenly, that Spencer did indeed have had it in him to carry out the bloody deeds he’d proposed to Wales. The magician-ghost, meanwhile, would more than likely have encouraged such mistaken belief, and in the process destroy both Spencer and Mackenzie (and others) – at any rate, such conceivably was the Archimago’s design. That Mackenzie then as well would utilize the occasion of the hangings to both re-assert his authority and impart, as he saw it, a valuable lesson to his naval students occurred only after he was firmly convinced that Spencer posed a real danger. At the same time, it is not hard to see that Mackenzie probably both sensed (at least as he saw it) a palpable threat and yet was also aware of how problematical it would be to later establish in a courtroom that there was an actual mutiny. Perhaps the executions themselves would serve as loud and undeniable proof that, if nothing else, he and in good conscience sincerely believed what he claimed.

In his defense, Spencer, as we noted previously, did seek to resign from the Navy and later to get transferred out of the *Somers*; in both of which efforts he was impeded by others. That he undertook such reasonable actions, and then seriously resolved upon mutiny as a last resort seems outlandish in the extreme. He, along with Cromwell and Small, was not only denied a fair trial and hearing, but he was not even interrogated by Mackenzie or Gansevoort at any length or by the council at all.<sup>84</sup> During the Inquiry and Court Martial no one spoke up personally in Spencer’s behalf, and yet his accusers were given free reign to say any and every bad thing they could about him. Nor was Spencer’s father, either himself or through attorneys, permitted to participate in the questioning and cross-examinations at the Court Martial; and which was the last and only tribunal for the prosecutors of Mackenzie to get a word in. What we do know about Spencer’s own response to the charges leveled against him comes almost entirely from Mackenzie, and it is possible that the latter even went so far as to prevent Spencer from writing a defense explaining his actions and situations to be sent home. Mackenzie, in effect, asserted that Spencer had nothing to say either to absolve himself or to at least extenuate his guilt. Yet guilt exactly for what? Mutiny? Baiting or playing a dangerous psychological game with the captain’s authority? Frightening him? Clearly, Mackenzie was furious and incensed at the thought of Spencer’s, whether joking or not, suggesting his murder. How credible, after all, then is Mackenzie’s report? If we allow the ghost theory, might it have been possible that Spencer tried in some way to attempt to explain what happened by making reference to the ghost? We of course don’t know, yet is interesting to observe that one of the very last things Mackenzie did before proceeding with the executions was to call Spencer a liar.<sup>85</sup> It is ironic, in retrospect, that intentionally or no, Commander Mackenzie himself ended up playing the pirate chief.

There are more than a few things in the story of the *Somers* “mutiny,” both before and after the hangings, that make Mackenzie look very bad; of which here we have only enumerated some. But even if we take James Fenimore Cooper’s view that Mackenzie was a poor and one-sided reasoner; who displayed

<sup>83</sup> CI p. 9.

<sup>84</sup> Crew members called in to testify before the council, incidentally, were: Charles Van Velzor, George Warner, M. A. Gedeny, M. H. Garty, O. B. Browning, Thomas Dickinson, William Collins, Andrew Anderson, Charles Rogers, Henry King, Peter Tyson, James W. Wales, Charles Stewart, Andrew Anderson.

<sup>85</sup> CM pp. 215, 218, 220, 327.

an appalling dearth of judgment, honesty, and objectivity, if he was contending with a magician-ghost he was combating, blindfolded, a thoroughly sinister figure who would show absolutely no mercy or fairness towards him. Like a general who loses a great battle and is roundly blamed for it afterward, could we ourselves really have done better, or as well, if we were there in his place? On these grounds, Mackenzie, and for all his undeniable faults and errors, deserves compassion. To this writer's mind, there is no question whatsoever that he meant well. Nor is it difficult to envisage that years later and when it was all over with, he, in private, felt acute regret and remorse about how he'd conducted himself. Otherwise, one is inclined to infer he remained in a most pitiful, self-deceiving daze till the end of his life.

At the end, we have then three possible explanations for what transpired on board the U.S. brig *Somers*.

- A. Spencer, with the aid of conspirators, planned and plotted a real mutiny.
- B. There was no actual mutiny, and Mackenzie, largely imagining the whole thing, overreacted.
- C. There was a magician-ghost present who sedulously orchestrated and choreographed the doom of all the principal players.

If one will have come thus far, and grant the possibility of there being such a thing as a magician-ghost, many I think will agree that C. appears a most viable explanation. We suggested earlier on that Mackenzie *may* have been aware that he was dealing with the supernatural. Though I personally am at least hesitant to think such was the case, yet if so, perhaps it was this that most prompted his draconian response to the situation. Possibly even at some point the ghost appeared in some form and was advising him what to do and (falsely) informing him of what was going on; not unlike how he'd advised Spencer. But the ghost, rather than come in whatever guise he appeared to Spencer as, took on a shape Mackenzie would more readily embrace, say "Jesus" or an "angel;" certain spirit people, after all, having the capacity for all manner of impersonation. So that when Mackenzie became determined on seeking Spencer and the others' deaths, it is not inconceivable (conceding the assumption) that he saw himself as having permission, even a mandate, from "God" to do so.<sup>86</sup>

---

<sup>86</sup> Perhaps à la or not unsubstantially unlike Brockden Brown's Wieland, or Garfield assassin Charles Guiteau? "The first reference to a church pennant flying above the national emblem is contained in the Proceedings of the Court of Inquiry [see CI p. 14] appointed to Inquire into the Intended Mutiny on board the United States Brig Somers...In the course of the inquiry Mackenzie described the events on the Sunday following the execution. According to custom, the crew was assembled and the laws governing the Navy were read. Then Mackenzie spoke briefly on 'the lessons to be drawn from the fate of those who had suffered.' He stated: 'In conclusion, I called on them, as they had given three cheers for their country, now to give three cheers for God — as they would do by singing his praise. The colors were then hoisted, and above the American Ensign was raised the Banner of the Cross -- the only flag that ever floats above it from any vessel under my command. The 100<sup>th</sup> Psalm was sung, after which the crew dispersed.' This testimony suggests not only that the church pennant was raised above the national emblem during Divine Worship but also that it was customary to fly it even when no chaplain was aboard to conduct such a service." Clifford Merrill Drury, *The History of the Chaplain Corps, United States Navy* (1948), p. 69.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### *Primary and Contemporary Sources*

- \* *Proceedings of the Court of Inquiry appointed to inquire into the intended mutiny on board the United States Brig Somers, etc.* (1843), reported for the New York Tribune.
- \* *Proceedings of the Naval Court Martial in the Case of Alexander Slidell Mackenzie, etc.; to which is annexed, An Elaborate Review, by James Fenimore Cooper* (1844)

- Adams, John Quincy. *Letters on the Masonic Institution* (1847)
- Anonymous. *A Collection of Letters on Freemasonry* [with correspondence by John Canfield Spencer, Richard Rush, Henry Tatem] (1849)
- Anonymous. *The Cruise of the Somers: Illustrative of the Despotism of the Quarterdeck and of the Unmanly Conduct of Commander Mackenzie* (1844)
- Anonymous. *Case of the Somers' Mutiny: Defence of Alexander Slidell MacKenzie, Commander of the U.S. Brig Somers, Before the Court Martial Held at the Navy Yard, Brooklyn* (1843)
- Ellms, Charles. *The Pirates Own Book: Authentic Narratives of the Most Celebrated Sea Robbers* (1837)
- Gouverneur, Marian. *As I Remember: Recollections of American Society during the Nineteenth Century* (1911)
- Hayford, Harrison (editor). *The Somers Mutiny Affair* (1959)
- Morgan, William. *Illustrations of Freemasonry* (1827 edition)
- Rogers, Robert C. "Some Reminiscences of Philip Spencer and the Brig 'Somers,'" *The United Service: A Monthly Review of Military and Naval Affairs*, vol. IV, July 1890, pp. 23-36.
- Weed, Thurlow. *The Autobiography of Thurlow Weed*, edited by his daughter Harriet A. Weed (1883)

### *Secondary Sources*

- Davis, Robert Scott. *Ghosts and Shadows of Andersonville: Essays on the Secret Social Histories of America's Deadliest Prison* (2006)
- Drury, Clifford Merrill. *The History of the Chaplain Corps, United States Navy* (1948)
- Goldberg, Angus Ephraim. *The Somers Mutiny of 1842* (2000) "a thesis submitted for the Degree of PhD at the University of St. Andrews."<sup>87</sup>
- Melton, Buckner F. Melton, Jr. *A Hanging Offense* (2003)
- McFarland, Philip. *Sea Dangers* (1985)
- McKee, Christopher. *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession* (1991)
- Morris, Robert. *William Morgan, or Political Anti-Masonry, Its Rise Growth and Decadence* (1883)

---

<sup>87</sup> Available as a .pdf at <http://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/>



“Freemasonry, with its private lodges and rituals, its deeply rooted and well-connected ‘Old Boy network,’ seemed quite undemocratic...” Buckner F. Melton, Jr., *A Hanging Offense*, p. 27.



John C. Spencer, New York jurist, President John Tyler’s Secretary of War, and Philip Spencer’s father.



Alex. Mackenzie

Mackenzie as sketched in *American Progress or Great Events of the Greatest Century* (1892), p. 293, by R.M. Devens; very possibly based on a now lost bust by Henry Dexter; and created with the bust's sponsors: "intention of giving a permanent token of their respect for him..." It was for years housed in Boston's Athenaeum, but slotted for Faneuil Hall once Mackenzie had passed away (as living person are not permitted to be commemorated there.) States David Dearinger, Director of Exhibitions at the Athenaeum: "Apparently, the desired transfer never happened. In fact, the bust was still at the Athenaeum in May 1901, when one of the librarians 'cleaned it.' In 1937, a base cut with the letters 'Alex. S. Mackenzie' was found in the bookstacks—but no mention of the bust; presumably it had disappeared (at least from the Athenaeum) by that point. (The fate of the 'base' after that date is not known.) One of the Athenaeum's librarians contacted Faneuil Hall in 1959 about the bust, just in case it had ended up there, but no such object was there, nor did Boston City records have any record of it having been given to the city."



Lieut. Guert Gansevoort, Mackenzie's second in command and a first cousin of Herman Melville. Gansevoort also made the pages of history commanding the brig *Decatur* at the battle in defense of Seattle against local tribes in 1856. *State Library Photograph Collection, 1851-1990, Washington State Archives.*



Another illustration from *The Pirates Own Book* (1837); which book, and before leaving Geneva College, Philip Spencer donated a copy of, signed by him, to the students library. The caption to the picture here reads: "The Pirates riding the Priests about deck."

Lieut. Slidell in *The Sea Service* (1834), p. 73, had written: "What can be more I beautiful than the grateful sense of divine interference with which Columbus and his followers hasten to fulfill their vows after their safe return to Palos? Such piety, if it availed not to avert present danger, at least served to inspire confidence to meet it; and, when past, the gratitude which it occasioned must have tended at once to refine the sentiments and ennoble the heart."

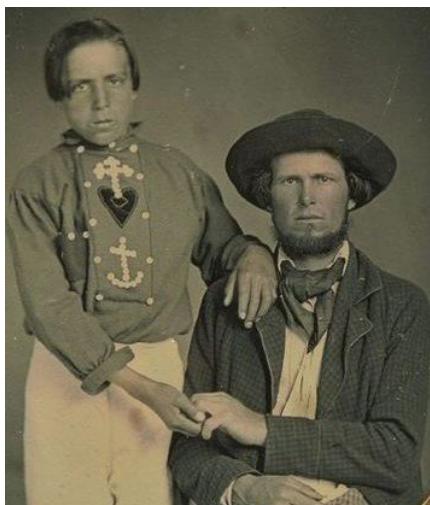


The only known contemporary portrait of Philip Spencer, and believed to be essentially correct and authentic in representing his appearance.



*Mutiny on board the United States Brig Somers.*

From *Confessions, Trials, and Biographical Sketches of the Most Cold Blooded Murderers, Who Have Been Executed in This Country, etc.* (1854 ed.) by George N. Thomson, p. 413.



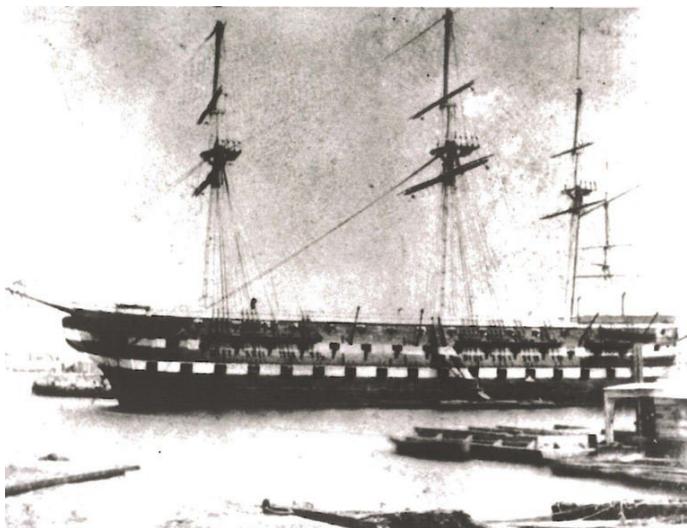
American boy and man sailors, circa late 1840's-1850's.



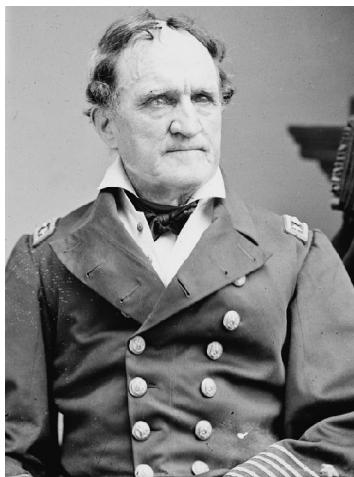
Philip Spencer, reading the other's palm, predicted a speedy and violent death for Midshipman Henry Rodgers; shown years later in this rare daguerreotype; one of the few such of any of the *Somers* participants that survives. Rodgers, as it happens, was lost at sea with all hands in the U.S. sloop *Albany* in Sept. 1854.



Midshipman Adrian Deslondes, another of the *Somers* officers, and, like Henry Rodgers, one of the familial relations on board of Slidell Mackenzie.



U.S. ship *North Carolina*, in New York Harbor, site of the *Somers* Court of Inquiry and Slidell Mackenzie Court Martial.



Captain Francis Gregory, inspector of the *Somers'* crew after her arrival in New York, and one inclined to be less than sympathetic with Mackenzie's handling of what took place.



A Lieutenant Peter Turner from 1844 in a U.S. naval dress uniform ostensibly very like that worn by Mackenzie at the executions.

~~~~\*\*\*~~~~

Copyright 2012. Wm. Thomas Sherman
TXu 1-835-322 : 25 Oct. 2012

This text may be freely copied, duplicated and given away; though under no circumstances may such copies be sold for profit without my consent. Last updated 4 Mar. 2019.

Wm. Thomas Sherman
1604 NW 70th St.
Seattle, Washington 98117
206-784-1132
wts@gunjones.com

<http://www.gunjones.com> and http://www.scribd.com/wsherman_1

For Lee's Legion on Face Book:
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/LeesLegion/>